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GREAT
GRENFELL
GARDENS

BY
B. H. BUXTON

AUTHOR OF

"JENNIE OF THE PRINCES"



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GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS.

GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS

3 Nobel.

By B. H. BUXTON,

AUTHOR OF "JENNIE OF THE PRINCE'S," "WON!" "FETTERLESS,"
"NELL—ON AND OFF THE STAGE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. II.

LONDON:
TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE ST., STRAND.
1879.

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251. f. 557.



GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS

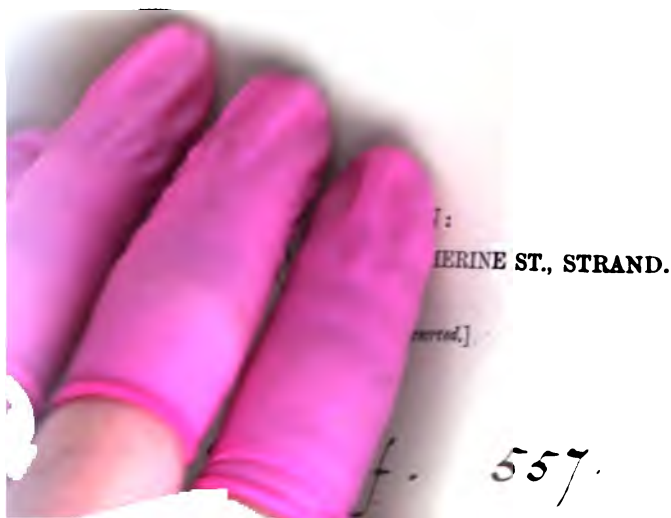
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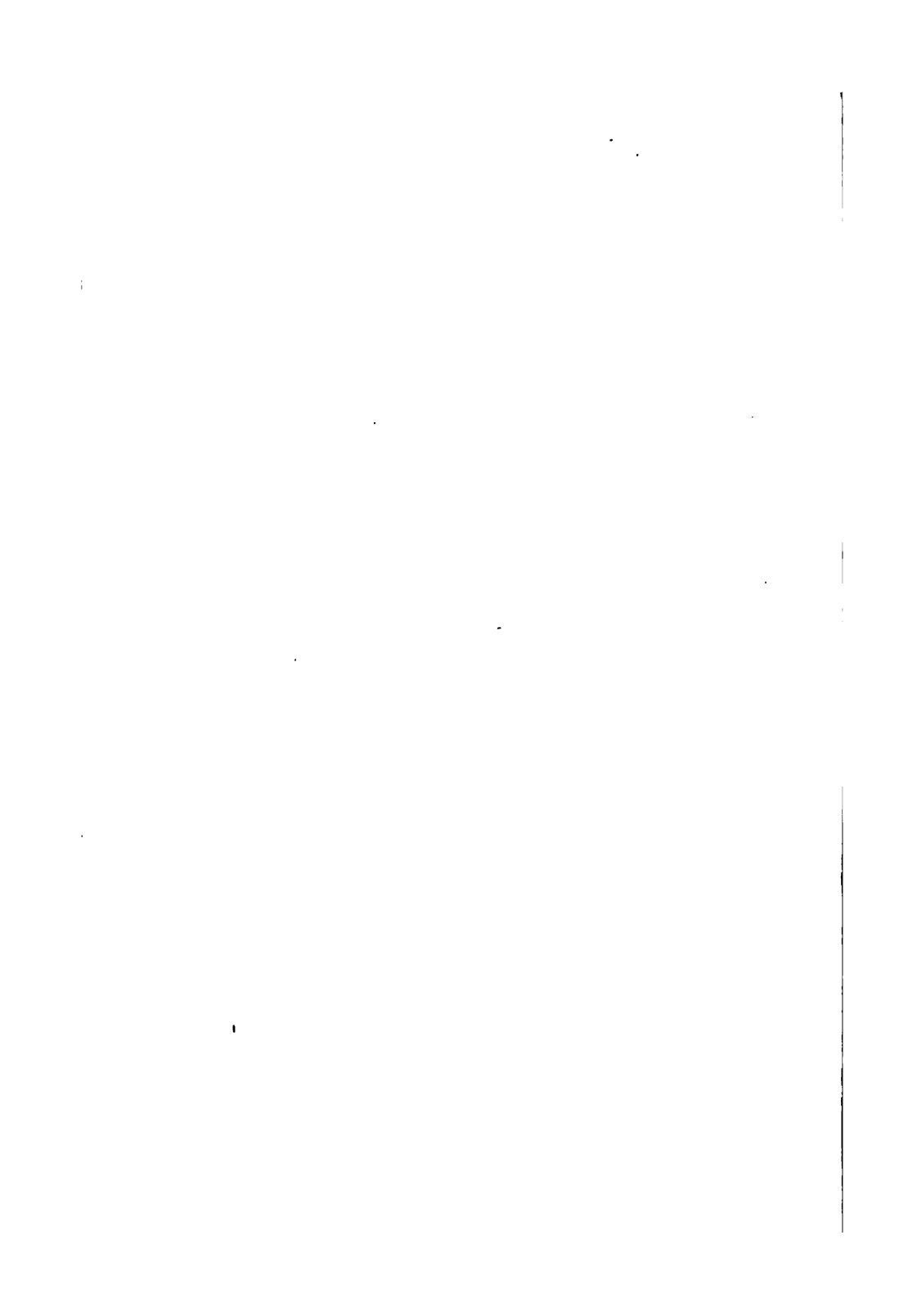
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In two minutes more the hansom had deposited them at the door of No. 40.

Estella, from her coign of vantage, saw them arrive, but her courage failed her—she could not open the door to Mr. St. Helier—whose visit she was in no sense prepared for.

“Are you not coming, too?” asked Hilda, seeing St. Helier turn from the door and descend the steps.

“No,” said he, looking up at her somewhat ruefully as he stood on the pavement below. “No; I could not be so cruel as to interrupt a young ladies’ *tête-à-tête*. I should be terribly in the way, and you would both vote me a bore.”

“A bore—what is that?” enquired Hilda, opening her beautiful eyes.

But St. Helier did not stop to explain.

He merely shook hands hurriedly, wished

Hilda "good-bye," but before he had walked a step returned again, and said nervously, "Be sure to remember me to the Misses Norman, and—don't forget to let me know what Miss Braun writes to you." Then he walked away with briskly resolute steps.

"Can it be possible that I am growing shy?" he asked himself, as he felt a warm glow of colour mount to his face. "Bah!" was the indignant mental reply, and he gave his cane an impatient switch. "Positively I'm an old fool," he continued his reflections; "at my time of life to be thinking of two pretty young girls."

Vexed and impatient as he certainly was at his folly, he could not keep his mind away from the drawing-room at No. 40, where his imagination persisted in conjuring up a vivid picture of the two pretty girls

with their sweet soft ways and their musical voices chattering to each other, and—"old fool" as he was—it relieved him thus to address himself reproachfully; he heartily wished he was with them. Ah! me, how many years had passed since he had ever given *any* woman a thought!

Like many an ardent youngster, he had paid dearly for his first burst of adoration at the shrine of woman. His idol had proved a designing trickster, who had well nigh ruined him.

The silver threads in his hair were marking how many a long year had passed over his head since then, and he was still a bachelor. So, he had vowed he would always remain; one disfiguring scar in a lifetime was cruel enough.

His little home, that "ne plus ultra," as Nettie had called it, now represented the

circumference of his wants and his ambitions. And yet in the face of these incontrovertible facts, here he was wishing himself in the drawing-room of No. 40, in the company of *two* young girls.

With a grim smile he muttered, "Well, they say there's safety in numbers;" having come to which proverbially-wise conclusion, he opened the door of his house with his latch-key.

On the whole he felt satisfied with his morning's work, and was pleased to know that he could conscientiously devote the rest of the day to his writing and his books.

Mrs. O'Neill, his housekeeper, had been his late mother's confidential maid. On her mistress's death, the faithful creature, who was herself a widow and childless, had installed herself as St. Helier's housekeeper.

“As good as a mother, and better than a wife to him,” was the woman’s own account of herself. She had nursed him in his infancy, watched over and participated in the few frolics of his somewhat sober boyhood, and proved her steadfast devotion to him in the trials of his youth.

Thus all the barriers which usually keep master and servant so far apart, had disappeared between St. Helier and his old Hibernian nurse, who now ruled his home with discretion, cleanliness, and economy.

Such domestic treasures are rare, but they may be met with occasionally even in the Emerald Isle. St. Helier’s house, his meals and his linen, were all faultlessly attended to by Mrs. O’Neill.

“Shure, sur, what w’d ye be afther wantin’ a wife for, unless may be it would

be one with a fortin enough to keep ye both?"

Such was Mrs. O'Neill's worldly-wise rejoinder, when her master was in a bantering mood, and told her that he felt he was neglecting his duty to humanity by not making some pretty girl happy as Mrs. St. Helier.

But Mrs. O'Neill had no fancy for happiness which would entail putting a mistress over her.

Holding these views, she was not specially pleased to behold a whole bevy of young ladies flocking into the house on that famous "musical afternoon."

"And what could the masther be afther, with that singing lady? He'd been out this mornin' again to see her. Was he goin' to marry her?" Such was the tenor of the thoughts which had been occupying

the housekeeper's mind during her master's absence.

When he returned she placed his mid-day chop before him, and resolved to attack the subject which had been perplexing her all the morning.

"If you plaze, sur," she said, "have ye bin afther that furrin young lady to-day?"

"Yes, I have been finding a place for her to live in," said St. Helier, willing to indulge Mrs. O'Neill's well known propensity for a little chat on "passing events."

"Might I be so bould," she resumed in an altered tone, which her master knew to be a sure sign of her displeasure, as well as the fact of her commencing her speech with an apology—"might I be so bould as to ask, sur, if ye're makin' up to her?"

Had any one but Mrs. O'Neill made such an enquiry, St. Helier would have resented

it, but she was privileged, and her question made him laugh. To teaze her he answered,

"Now don't you think she would make an excellent wife for me? I am getting old now, you know, Kitty."

"Ah! hould yer tongue with yer ouldness," cried the Hibernian hotly. "I hope it ain't a furriner as ye'll be afther marryin' when ye do begin—"

But whatever Kitty's views may have been, she was prevented from enlarging upon them, or further edifying her master, by that inexorable summons, the hall-bell.

"A letter, and to wait for an answer, sur," said Mrs. O'Neill politely, handing her master the epistle upon an artistic lacquer tray. St. Helier prided himself on the accurate details of his domestic establishment.

"What does the woman write to *me*

for?" he exclaimed as he tore open the note and read the following effusion from the un-English pen of Mrs. Braun:

39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W.

Tuesday.

Mutch respeckted Mr. St. Helier!

Miss Theodosia, mine daughter, and I, have consider your offering, and we will accept him. For the terms then, as we arrange this morning. The lady can go in her pretty room to-morrow, if she will.

You will pardon that I mention it is mine rule for to pay the money in avance. And I hope you will not objeck to be a garantie for the strange lady, for sure you are her gardien, is it not? Ven you will bring the lady, we talk for all the rest.

With a gracefull compliment, I am

Your respecktfull,

JOHANNA BRAUN. 2

“Confound it, this will never do,” thought St. Helier, aghast at the contents of this semi-Teutonic epistle. “I must undeceive ‘Mrs. Johanna Braun’ at once.”

He rose hastily, leaving his chop to get cold on his plate, to the great annoyance of the faithful Kitty, who felt convinced that the singing furriner was at the bottom of the fit of indigestion her master would be sure to suffer from, after such unwonted interruptions to the regularity of his meals and “all his ways.”

Regardless of her entreaties to “ate a bit,” St. Helier walked away into his library, where he sat down and wrote as follows—


Little Grenfell Grove, S.W.

DEAR MADAM,—I hasten to disabuse your mind relative to my supposed guardianship of the Signorina Santarelli.

That lady's father is an old friend of mine. His business necessitates his presence in Rome, just as the prospective career of the Signorina necessitates her coming to London.

My friend is a widower, and his means are limited. There was no choice possible to him, *à propos* of his daughter's journey to England. Aware of his dilemma, I offered to meet the Signorina in Paris, where we both arrived last Saturday morning. I returned with the lady the same evening. I had further promised the Signor to find a suitable home for his daughter, as she preferred her independence to being the guest of Mrs. Vivian, a lady who was acquainted with the Signorina in Rome, and who had invited her to reside at her house in the Gardens.

As to terms, etc., the Signorina is quite



able to arrange these matters for herself, and will no doubt refer you to Messrs. C——, her father's bankers.

I remain, Madam,

Yours truly,

EVERARD ST. HELIER.

"There, that's settled, and definitely I hope," was St. Helier's mental comment as he returned to the dining room, where the tender care of Mrs. O'Neill had already substituted a freshly grilled chop for the neglected morsel.

St. Helier, keenly appreciative of such kindly forethought, and the evident care bestowed on his comfort, thanked poor old Kitty with a smiling word, and feeling that he had satisfactorily solved a knotty point, enjoyed his luncheon, and his pint of Beaune, with renewed zest. Presently he settled himself in the easiest chair his

library contained, for an afternoon of undisturbed and peaceful enjoyment with a favourite author. He had been considerably ruffled by the occurrences of the morning, and therefore doubly appreciated the tranquil comfort of the solitary afternoon.

But soon after three o'clock the pealing of the hall-bell startled him again, and presently Mrs. O'Neill announced "Mr. Norman."

"Ah! how do you do? delighted to see you," said St. Helier, cordially, as he advanced to meet his visitor.

But Mr. Norman was stiff and unresponsive.

"Pardon me, Mr. St. Helier;" here Mr. Norman coughed, and evidently was at a loss how to proceed, for hum and ah! and eh! seemed inefficient sounds for the commencement of a conversation.

Still they led him on to his next somewhat startling announcement—

“I have come to you as a father.”

“God bless me ! what does he mean ?” wondered St. Helier, and drew himself up rather stiffly too, as he realised that his visitor was not bound on a pleasant mission.

“As a father,” repeated Mr. Norman with renewed emphasis.

“I regret that I cannot enter into your feelings there, never having been one,” said St. Helier, who was growing irritated, but strove to hide his vexation by a forced laugh.

“I am not here to joke,” said Mr. Norman sternly, though inwardly thankful to have extricated himself from the difficulties which the word ‘father’ had brought him to. “I consider, Mr. St. Helier, that you owe me an explanation.”

"An explanation of what, pray?" cried St. Helier promptly, and added, "I am not aware that I have said or done anything to necessitate your demanding such of me."

"You invited my daughters to your house, to meet a young lady about whom we know nothing, except that she occupies the doubtful position of being under your protection, and I must say that I consider you were wanting in,—in respect towards me, when you invited my daughters to meet a person—" Mr. Norman was flushed and spoke with rising wrath, in proportion to the extent his grievance assumed, as he recounted it.

St. Helier, on the contrary, was excessively calm and self contained, though lividly pale.

When Mr. Norman used the obnoxious term "person," St. Helier stopped him

with uplifted hand. "Excuse me," he said, "if I request you to pause before you allow yourself to say another word of a detrimental character of my friend the Signorina Santarelli, who has been specially recommended to my care by her father, a widower. He has been my very good friend for the last fifteen years. At his request I undertook the charge of his daughter, so far that I promised to find a suitable home for her, and to procure her such introductions as will be necessary to facilitate her views of becoming a singer in London."

"Exactly so," said Mr. Norman testily, "and I don't think you paid me any compliment, sir, when you selected my daughters as associates for a young lady who has evidently come to England like other adventurous foreigners, to see what can be got out of it." This was a familiar

grievance of Mr. Norman's, as has been stated before, and he tackled it "con amore," or rather "con vigore."

"I assure you I meant it as the highest compliment I could pay your daughters, Mr. Norman," said St. Helier, who was considerably perplexed by the other's vehemence. "I admire them so sincerely, that I felt the best service I could do my friend's daughter would be to introduce her to them, and I am sure you saw nothing objectionable in the girl herself."

"No," said Mr. Norman cooling as he realised the other's unreserved frankness, "indeed, I have nothing to urge against the lady, who appears all that is excellent; but you must be aware, Mr. St. Helier, that a young lady exposes herself to misinterpretation when she accepts the protection of a gentleman who is not a

relative, who meets her in Paris, travels with her, and once in London, drives about with her, makes arrangements for her, and, in fact, may be anything to her from the position he appears to assume."

The truth of these remarks came home to Mr. St. Helier, and gave them the power to sting.

With angry resentment he replied, "I allow no one to question my private affairs, or course of action. As you object to your daughters having met and formed an acquaintance with the Signorina Santarelli, I am sorry. In future I would suggest that your objections should be extended to myself also—since I am the real delinquent.

"By no means," cried Mr. Norman hastily. He did not wish or intend to have a rupture with St. Helier.

But that gentleman was sore, and angry. too, now. He felt that he had placed himself in an awkward position, and bitterly resented the bruise he had received in consequence.

In his pride, which would brook no interference, he determined to cast these consequences aside.

"I have no desire to alter our friendly intercourse, I assure you," continued Mr. Norman amicably; for his wrath, which was not deep, had all evaporated by this time; "but my daughters are motherless, and my anxiety on their account is therefore doubled. My second girl is already too romantically inclined, and I do not wish her to associate with people who may give latitude to her views."

Poor little Estella! When her father spoke of her, it went hard with St. Helier

to persist in his determination to withdraw from all acquaintance with her family, for Estella interested him far more than he dared to allow, even to himself. He thought, on one or two occasions, that he had noticed certain signs which, had he been more vain or sanguine, he might have construed into mute avowals of something very like preference for himself.

Still a man seldom forgives an imputation cast upon his *savoir faire*, and the very fact of certain vague misgivings on his own part made him all the more firm in contending that his course had been the right one throughout.

"I regret," he said coldly, "that I should have been guilty of what you deem an injustice to your daughter, Mr. Norman, and but trust that you will consider the

error repaired by all intercourse ceasing between us for the future."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and thus obliged Mr. Norman to do the same. Both felt that the interview was at an end.

"No doubt that is the better course," replied Mr. Norman, in an equally frosty manner.

And so the two men parted, both secretly sorry that they had let their pride get the better of their discretion, both realising that they had lost something.

"I dare say the girl is right enough," thought Mr. Norman, as he walked home full of misgivings as to how he should account to his girls for the coolness between St. Helier and himself.

But he was consoled by the reflection that if St. Helier meant to marry Hilda,

as seemed probable enough now, it would be as well for his girls not to grow too fond of the barrister. He half suspected that his romantic Estella was that way inclined already; if so, the break was better now than later on.

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE SPECULATION.

BEFORE Mr. Norman had put his latch-key into the door of No. 40, he had resolved to keep his own counsel as regarded his interview with Mr. St. Helier, and its deplorable results.

He had come to the conclusion that discretion, or rather silence, would be the best policy on his part, until some opportunity occurred which would necessitate his broaching the disagreeable subject to his daughters.

Estella and Nettie rejoiced when they

found that their father had apparently no intention of further reproving them for that clandestine visit of Hilda's.

During the Signorina's interview with Estella, she had so captivated that romantic young person that it would indeed have been a bitter blow to her had Mr. Norman tabooed their future intercourse.

Estella was now looking forward with the greatest impatience to the day that would see Hilda fairly installed as an inmate of No. 39, and thus constitute her one of the Grenfellians, whom, with few exceptions, the Normans looked upon as a vast family circle.

Mary, having heard the report of both her sisters, on her return from Bayswater deemed it advisable to call upon Mrs. Braun herself, to ascertain further particulars regarding the Signorina.

Mary chose an opportune moment for her visit, for St. Helier's letter to Mrs. Braun arrived with her, and the old lady, who was evidently much impressed by the sisterly anxieties which her visitor confided to her, lent Mary the satisfactory letter to show to Mr. Norman.

He listened to his daughter's account of the Signorina with silent attention, and then read St. Helier's letter without a word of comment. Secretly, however, he was congratulating himself on his previous reticence.

"Since Mrs. and Miss Braun have undertaken the surveillance of the Signorina, there can be no further objection to our girls meeting her," he said indifferently; and, after a moment's reflection, added, "You must guard them against too close an intimacy with the foreigner, Mary; for Estella, especially, such companionship is not desirable."

Mary felt very much inclined to ask a leading question *à propos* of St. Helier, but she, like her father, had proved that reticence is often synonymous with discretion.

"I called upon Mrs. Vivian, as you wished me to do, father," she informed him.

"I am glad of that," said he.

"She received me most amicably," continued Mary, "and has asked me to bring the girls round on Monday afternoon to take tea with her; and I have promised to do so. Her account of the Signorina was eminently satisfactory also. She has but one fault to find with her, and that is her 'proud reserve'."

"Ah!" remarked Mr. Norman, and hastily changed the subject, which was becoming irksome to him, by enquiring

how the "Shoddy-Princess" had furnished her house.

"Magnificence and lavish display are too feeble to express the overwhelming gorgeousness of her furniture and the style of decoration," said Mary laughing, as she adopted Nettie's superlatives. "I feel that my powers of description are not equal to the wonders of Mrs. Vivian's establishment," she added; "Nettie will do them justice on Monday. You don't mind the girls going there with me, do you, father?"

"Not in the least," said he, and hastened to leave the room, and thus to avoid the necessity of any further explanation.

He walked out through the open window into the Gardens, and again congratulated himself on the easy manner in which he had managed this difficult affair. As for its possible consequences, he consoled him-

self with the thought that Time, the universal healer, would soon mend the slight rupture between St. Helier and himself—which, after all, was but skin-deep.

On the following Saturday afternoon, the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode called upon Miss Norman. Finding Mary in the drawing-room, the visitor apologised, and asked if she might see *Estella*, for whom she had a special message from the Countess Dowager.

“I quite thought *you* were Miss Norman, my dear,” said the authoress, embracing her “dear young friend” with effusion.

Her pretended ignorance of the existence of an *elder* daughter, made the task Adela-ida had set herself less difficult.

She had obtained one card from “the dear Dow,” for the At-Home on the 16th, and that hospitable peeress had warned “Addie” that she would be permitted to introduce

one friend only on that occasion, instead of the proverbial half-dozen, who usually strutted or fluttered in her wake.

Sweet-tempered Addie took this caution very good-naturedly, and instead of in any sense resenting it, at once said,

"I promise you I'll make the very best use of the one card, my dear Dow, by giving it to one of the prettiest and nicest girls you have ever seen."

That girl was Estella Norman, for whom Adela-ida had conceived one of her sudden and gushing "friendships," and whom she had resolved to chaperon to the great At-Home herself. As for the Signorina, poor Addie's economical intentions in regard to that musical lady had been forestalled, for Mrs. Vivian had already called upon Hilda with a card from the Countess. How that card came into Mrs. Vivian's hands must be explained.

On the occasion of their first meeting, Peregrine Latimer had been much impressed by the magnificent toilet and arrogant bearing of the "Shoddy-Princess."

Well versed in the study of "human nature," Latimer had no trouble in making a mental diagnosis of the American, and very soon discovered the direct route to Mrs. Vivian's favour, which he was anxious to obtain.

Acting on his conclusions, he baited a trap for the ambitious American, and elected to be present at the moment in which she would be likely to make her first nibble.

Latimer's method of toasting the cheese was to induce the Countess Dowager to call upon the "Shoddy-Princess," whom he described as such to her eccentric ladyship.

The Countess was undoubtedly "peculiar" in her ways, her likes, and her dislikes, but she was thoroughly consistent.

She preferred her younger delicate and thriftless son, the Honourable Benjamin Raynewater, to the sedate, pedantic, and eminently "correct" first-born, the present Earl, who was too much of a "prig" in manner and politics to suit the advanced liberal views of her ladyship.

The Honourable Benjamin, a feckless consumptive youth, had some years ago been sent out to Melbourne for the sake of the voyage.

He arrived at the Australian port lonely and wretched, mentally and physically in a despondent condition.

Thus Latimer, the prosperous sheep-farmer, had discovered the youth to whom he shewed great kindness and every possible attention.

Young Benjamin, feeling himself in temporary exile, though not absolutely out-

lawed, formed a strong attachment for Peregrine Latimer, and when that gentleman was "homeward bound," he brought urgent letters of recommendation from the Honourable Mr. Raynewater to his fond mamma, which ensured the ex-Colonial a cordial welcome from her ladyship, who soon grew personally attached to the merry silver-haired giant. At first she liked him for the sake of her absent Benjamin, but very soon on his own account.

He was so worldly wise, so amusing, had such a fund of anecdote and such wonderful powers of resource.

Latimer thoroughly understood the weird machinations of the Stock Exchange too, and had a peculiar facility in the manipulation of money. Twice already had he converted a five-pound note into twenty golden sovereigns for her ladyship, who enjoyed

these little gambling transactions much as she did every other proceeding that might be considered "irregular."

She knew Latimer managed this "coup" for her by his clever mode of investment, though he modestly called it "a ready-money trick," and how he laughed as he said so!

The Countess, secretly pocketing her sovereigns, felt herself entitled to laugh heartily too. She knew she could trust Latimer, and that these little speculations of hers would not be spoken of to any outsider.

Such cleverness combined with discretion, had soon raised the Australian immensely in her ladyship's esteem. He was perfectly aware now that she was both ready and willing to serve him, if this should be in her power. When he, therefore, requested the

Countess to oblige him by leaving her card at the house of her new neighbour, Mrs. Vivian, he felt assured of her ladyship's consent.

Indeed, he gained that and the three "At-Home" cards he specially desired for the 16th, without any difficulty. Two were required for Mrs. Vivian and Ronald, and one for that wonderful singer in whom Mr. St. Helier appeared to take so great an interest.

And how about poor Theodosia?

Was Mr. Latimer ignorant of the intense desire agitating that gentle maiden to be present at the great At-Home?

If so, it was cruel of him not to exert himself a little on behalf of a lady so manifestly devoted to him.

A word from him at this time would have obtained the open-sesame card with which

poor Dosie might have stepped into the drawing-room of a countess, which presented the idea of elysium to her untutored ambition.

And yet that word was never spoken by the man on whom she had lately lavished such care, comfort, and attention as he would scarcely have received had he been the master of No. 39, instead of simply a "guest," and a guest on whom Mrs. Braun was beginning to look with less favour, since there was a considerable balance on her books against this special favourite of Dosie's.

The spinster had most earnestly implored her mother on no account to importune him for such a trifle.

"He knows my rules, he knows my terms, and he should keep it," said Mrs. Braun crossly. "Nothing gives me so much

vexation as any unpunctuality in the payment."

"Promise you won't ask him until after the 16th, dear mamma," pleaded Theodosia, clinging to a forlorn hope.

"It will make no matter to him, mine child, or to me," said the old lady, touched by the gentleness of Theodosia's look and tone; "but I will give him till the 20th, as you wish it."

Mr. Latimer felt that he had been directly instrumental in launching Mrs. Vivian on the smooth surface of London society, or what the credulous American construed as such, since he had obtained the promise of the Countess to call upon her neighbour.

"Provided you don't inveigle me into going when 'La Shoddy' is at home," was her ladyship's condition, and this Latimer promised to arrange satisfactorily.

He was now a constant and an ever-welcome visitor at the startlingly-magnificent residence over which the Shoddy-Princess reigned with such conscious pride, asking for and accepting the manifold suggestions of her new ally and adviser as to improvements in the style and decoration of her mansion with complimentary alacrity. He accompanied her on shopping expeditions, too, and under his direction she selected and purchased Japanese curios and European china to an extent that fairly amazed the shopkeeper, although the visit of the wealthy American had been previously announced to him by Mr. Latimer, who may have had some personal, though private, interest in these lavish purchases, beyond the gratification of seeing the "princess" squandering her money.

It was on their return from one of the most extensive and protracted of these

shopping expeditions that Mrs. Vivian found the card of the Countess Dowager awaiting her, and soon overcoming the momentary regret at her absence from home, said she thoroughly appreciated the fact that her ladyship had chosen to come round in the morning, which was truly neighbourly and informal.

Latimer quite agreed with Mrs. Vivian, and willingly accepted her cordial invitation to stay and share her belated luncheon.

"Ronald has gone to Cambridge to look up some friends of his," she explained, as she and her guest sat down to table. "He is not much pleasure or comfort to me, that son of mine," she added. "He has a craze for what he calls 'artistic studies,' and there's just nothing practical or commercial in his constitution; perhaps that's the reason he and I don't get along first-rate together."

Mother and son, certainly, were somewhat unsympathetic, but wisely agreed to differ amiably, each one going his or her way, without in the least interfering with the other.

In Rome they had occasionally come into violent collision, in regard to Ronald's perverse admiration for the Signorina Santarelli; but, then, his mother, seeing that he suffered acutely, had ignored her personal objections, and come to his aid.

Her mediation was not successful. Still, Ronald had appreciated her good intentions, and now resigned himself by tacitly acquiescing in his mother's novel pastime of laying siege to the higher circles of London society. So she went on in her ambitious career unchecked, and Ronald was left to his pursuits, unhindered also.

Mr. Latimer rejoiced to find that the

luncheon was to be *en tête-à-tête*, and exerted himself throughout the meal to entertain and please his voluble hostess.

"We will take our coffee in my boudoir," said Mrs. Vivian, rising and leading the way to that treasure-house of ormolu, lacquer, Persian rugs, and gold-embroidered satins.

"These everlasting advertisements will send me crazy one day, I guess," she said, lifting up a handful of open-ended missives, which the book-post had brought her that morning.

Latimer raised his eyebrows enquiringly, and thrust his right hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, as he settled himself in an attitude of attention. He leant back in the comfortable spring-backed arm-chair which Mrs. Vivian had indicated to him as surprisingly "cunning."

"Can I be of any assistance, Mrs. Vivian?" he asked with an encouraging smile.

"Wal, I don't exactly know," said she. "You see, the fact is, that people have found out I've got some money, and it seems as if they couldn't allow me to get rid of it in my own way, for the hundreds of circulars I get about paid-up capital, insurances, and stocks and shares, would puzzle the brains of a city man, I'm sure; so you'll guess what they do for me."

"Can I be of assistance to you in any way?" repeated Latimer eagerly.

"Indeed you can," she replied; "for the fact is, I have a sum at my disposal just now, the proceeds of some houses just sold for me in New York, and I want to put a part of the money out at a profitable rate of interest."

Latimer's hand was thrust still farther into that capacious breast-pocket, but he did not speak as yet.

Mrs. Vivian went back to her writing-table, and took up a pamphlet she had reserved when she threw the others aside.

"This came to me this morning," she said; "but it's not so foolish as the rest, and I confess it has taken my fancy, for it's real cunning."

Seating herself by Mr. Latimer's side, she offered it to him.

"This is most extraordinary," he exclaimed, with his genial laugh, and at this moment drew forth a similar pamphlet from that mysterious pocket of his. "*I* believe in this, Mrs. Vivian," he said, in his tone of conviction; "and I have just been elected Honorary Secretary to the Great Anti-Bee Company."

“How wonderful!” she cried delighted as she heard this announcement. “I liked this project better than any I’ve heard of as yet; indeed, I took to it from the moment I read the prospectus through. It’s so natural, and so useful, and is sure to be taken up by the million. It’s the very notion to find favour in America; and we do know how to make money in the States; don’t we, now?”

“Indeed, yes,” said Latimer pleasantly.

“You make your millions there as easily as our Company will make honey for the millions here.”

“That’s so,” cried Mrs. Vivian, clapping her bejewelled hands; “and what a mercy to do away with those buzzing bees and their troublesome stings. For my part I’ve just a real craze for honey, and I’d like to join any scheme which will bring a good

supply of the article on to the breakfast-table of either Britishers or Yankees."

"I agree with you entirely, Mrs. Vivian," cried Latimer cordially; "and in promising my unflagging energy and my steady support to this Company, I feel that it is not only as a good investment for some spare cash of mine that I am exerting myself, but because I can thus prove myself what I aspire to be, a philanthropist in the highest sense of the word. What could be better for the moral elevation of the species than the constant supply of sweet nutriment to the body, the sensitive home of the soul?" Mr. Latimer shook his "noble" head meditatively, and tossed his silvery locks from his face with the graceful movement which Theodosia so much admired.

Mrs. Vivian smiled by way of response to her adviser's fine sentiments, but these had

really been considerably beyond her comprehension, and she eagerly took advantage of his meditative pause to return to the more practical part of their discussion by making minute inquiries into the number of shares, the liability of their holders, and the aggregate capital of the Great Anti-Bee Company, which undertook to supply honey to the million at 3d. per lb.

Mr. Latimer, who could be the most matter-of-fact and business-like of men, whenever commercial interests were involved, immediately abandoned the discourse on philanthropy, in which he had allowed himself to indulge, and surprised and delighted his attentive listener by the precision of detail with which he now elaborated the great Anti-Bee scheme, proving to her, in self-asserting figures, that an investment in ten shares, at £100 each, must give her *at*

least 30 per cent. interest for her money, besides leaving the shares, *i.e.*, the actual property, in her own hands, to be disposed of at more tempting premiums after a time, or certainly to enable her at any moment to recover her original outlay.

Mrs. Vivian, who prided herself on her knowledge of figures and on her genius for speculation, followed the intricacies of the arithmetical puzzle Mr. Latimer was elaborating for her with growing interest.

When she felt she had thoroughly grasped the comprehensive view of enormous profits opening before her dazzled eyes, she turned them upon Mr. Latimer, and gravely confronting him, said,

“Then I may understand that, as a friend, you would advise me to invest the sum I spoke of in this scheme rather than in any other you know of?”

“Most emphatically *yes*,” said Mr. Latimer, bringing his clenched fist so heavily down upon the frail ebony table on which the pamphlets, the arithmetical diagnosis, and the inkstand were resting, that it seemed to shudder under this emphatic blow.

“And what is the sum you would like to invest with us, Mrs. Vivian?” he asked, and it was now his turn to confront the Shoddy-Princess, whose glance he met with intense interest in his.

“Two thousand pounds!” she answered; “that is the sum I shall receive from New York on the 15th.”

“The day before the great At-Home?” suggested Latimer.

“Yes,” said she slowly, and a look of vexation contracted her brow as she added, “I really had set my heart on going there;

but suppose there's no possibility now, since the Hon. Mrs. Toegoode has not kept faith with me? I did reckon on her, and I showed her a heap of attention in Paris—"

The American spoke almost plaintively.

"I imagined you would like to be present at the Countess's reception," said Latimer, smiling blandly, "so I endeavoured to forestall your wishes."

As he spoke he drew forth the invitation-cards from his pocket-book, and handed them to the delighted lady.

"Now, this is real good of you, Mr. Latimer," she cried, and he felt that he had indeed baited his trap successfully.

"You really desire me to secure you shares to the amount of £2,000?" he asked, as she was fingering the large paste-boards which were to open the doors of "real high life" to her.

"Most certainly, if you will be so good," said she. "If you will call on the morning of the 15th, I can either hand the money to you here, or we can proceed to the offices of the Company together."

"I will not fail you," he replied promptly, and after a pause, added, "I would make a suggestion to you which you may like to adopt. I have obtained another card from the Countess for the Signorina Santarelli, whom I named as *your* friend."

Mrs. Vivian's face betrayed displeasure.

"For a very good reason, of course," said Latimer quickly. "The Countess loves music, and adores operatic singing; but her ladyship does not care to pay £20 for the pleasure of one scena, when she can hear a whole opera from her stall for a guinea. Therefore, I mentioned the Signorina as *your* friend. If you chaperon her,

and then request her to sing, the Countess will thoroughly appreciate the favour *you* are doing her, do you see?"

"Indeed, and I do!" replied the American, radiant smiles having cleared all the threatening frowns away; "and I do think, of all the clever, cunning men I ever met, you're the most so."

Latimer bowed gratefully, although he did not quite approve of the second adjective in Mrs. Vivian's complimentary phrase; but then she was not English, and gave a strange meaning to some words.

"*I* am fully convinced that you will not regret your proposed investment in the Anti-Bee Company," he said presently; "still it might be more satisfactory to you first to consult your lawyer on the advisability of connecting yourself with an enterprise which is still in its infancy?"

"I hate lawyers," cried Mrs. Vivian flushing, "and if they were known by the name they deserve, they would all be called thieves!"

"My dear madam," cried Latimer aghast at this un-English vehemence, but added in a very gentle tone, "although I am obliged to protest against your harsh judgment on the legal profession, I cannot but feel gratified by the fact of your trusting me without first consulting a solicitor. For my part, I have no cause to be grateful to them as a class either."

"I hate the whole lot!" cried Mrs. Vivian; "I never will go through the absurd form of consulting men whom I distrust as rascals. Now, don't you look horrified, Mr. Latimer; you know their dirty ways as well as I do."

Latimer shot a curious look at her flushed face from under his heavy brows, then tossed his silvery locks away with a jerk, and blandly smiled as she continued,

“ I’ve got my father’s money and plenty of it, for he once ‘struck ile.’ I was his only child, and his fortune was left me in my own right, and with it some of his fine business capacity too. He never trusted the carying lawyers in his time, and so he kept his innings pretty tight, and I mean to walk in his footsteps. I’m my own legal adviser, and instead of permitting any cheating lawyer, either a Britisher or an American, to help himself to my dollars, I intend to make a few thousands on my own account. You said as true a thing to Mr. Norman the other day as ever I heard. ‘Money begets money,’ were your words,

and I'll prove the wisdom of your remark before I'm a year older."

"The Misses Norman are in the drawing-room, madam," announced the footman, opening the door of the boudoir.

CHAPTER III.

LATIMER TO THE RESCUE.

"I WILL be with them directly," said Mrs. Vivian rising, and turning to Mr. Latimer she added, "You will stay and take some tea with us, will you not?"

Latimer, whose spirits were more than usually exuberant this afternoon, assented with alacrity, and offering his arm to the American with that profuse show of gallantry, which she so much admired as indicative of "polish," was conducted to the drawing-room where the Misses Norman were waiting.

“My darling girls, I am delighted indeed,” cried Mrs. Vivian, imitating the effusive style of a certain titled lady whom she had met and admired at a distance in Rome ; a lady who assumed airs of intense admiration and affection for girls in general, and who always addressed her particular favourites as “my darling girl, or girls,” as the case might be. Determined to copy her aristocratic model accurately, the Shoddy-Princess now approached the Norman girls with extended arms, and, to their manifest surprise, kissed each in turn on either cheek, and loudly congratulated them on their charming appearance. “Only my dear Miss Estella looks a little delicate,” she said, and added insinuatingly, “too much gaiety, night vigils, late hours, my child? Indeed this must not be. Looks are of such infinite importance to young ladies, don’t you know?”

"Your brilliant sister certainly does not seem as animated as usual, Miss Nettie," whispered Mr. Latimer, laying his large hand paternally on Nettie's shoulder.

Nettie shrank from his touch as though it scorched her. "I do so hate being pawed by anybody," she afterwards explained to Mary who had noticed this abrupt movement on the Baby's part.

Quite aware of the astonishment with which Mr. Latimer regarded her, she replied to his remark with unusual civility.

"It's not gaiety that makes Estella look so pale and worn," she said also in a whisper; "it's *work*. You can't imagine how she devotes herself to her writing." Seeing a look of enquiring interest in Mr. Latimer's keen brown eyes, Nettie, warming to her subject, unfolded the mystery of the growing MS., and dwelt on the wondrous attractions

of 'Gwendolen' and 'Reginald,' who had already proceeded on their chequered career so far as the middle of the second volume.

After the girls had partaken of tea, during which there had been much animated and desultory chat, of which the Dowager's approaching *soirée* formed the leading topic, Mr. Latimer found an opportunity to say to Estella,

"A little bird has whispered to me that you are writing a novel.

"Now, any work inspired by such evident talent as yours, and written by your fair hands under the guidance of your beautiful eyes *must* be admirable, of that I am convinced."

"Really, Mr. Latimer, I don't know what reason you can have for such a conclusion," said Estella nervously, and flushed by that tell-tale colour of hers, which always bore witness to every unusual emotion on her part.

“ Ah! but I have a reason, and a very good one,” said Latimer, and his eyes seemed to corroborate his statement by their overt glance of admiration.

Estella was young, romantic, ambitious, perhaps a little *exaltée*, certainly she loved admiration, and praise always encouraged her.

Of late she had received scant tribute to her undeniable charms, and her talents were languishing for want of the stimulant of encouraging words; therefore she listened to Mr. Latimer in astonishment at first, and then with an undeniable feeling of gratification.

He at least appreciated her, and though she had not liked him hitherto, she had always considered him clever. It is most delightful to be appreciated, thought poor Estella, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling, she wished this admiration could

have come to her from another. But, alas ! that other had neither admiration nor interest for her. His thoughts were concentrated on Hilda, whose charming manner and glorious voice had entranced him. . . .

"If you are thinking of publishing your book, Miss Estella," said Mr. Latimer, suddenly breaking in upon her day-dreams, "I think I can materially assist you."

"*Really?*" cried Estella brightening as she had not done for many days past.

"Really," answered Latimer decisively. "I will tell you how to set about it in the Gardens presently."

"We shall be there all the evening," said Estella, "and oh ! I thank you so much, Mr. Latimer." Then seeing that her sisters had risen, Estella went to her hostess, thanked her for "such a pleasant afternoon," and bid her good-bye.

What was Mr. Latimer going to say to her in the Gardens? she wondered. He really spoke as though Gwendolen, her brain's most precious firstborn, were soon to see the light in print. No wonder she "walked on air," as Nettie declared, laughing gaily, and added, "What a humbug you are, Stella. How could you thank Mrs. Vivian for *such* a pleasant afternoon! when there was no Ronald and no Mr. St. Helier, and not even 'a musical friend' to enliven our dulness?"

"I found Mr. Latimer very entertaining to-day," said Estella warmly, "and you and Mary played your overture charmingly."

"Praise from Sir—, what d'ye call him? —is praise indeed," cried Nettie; "and now let us make a rush to be up at the tennis-net first." So saying, she laughingly

bounded across the Gardens, followed more sedately by her elder sisters.

They were in no particular hurry, neither croquet nor the far more enticing lawn-tennis offered any special attraction to them.

Mary, after her promise to Mr. Latimer at that oft-remembered and constantly-quoted first dinner-party, had felt herself compelled to make an effort at lawn-tennis, but her very mild attempts at "hitting" exposed her to so much fault-finding and derision, that she very soon desisted from a game which necessitated far more romping than she considered becoming in any but very young girls.

Mary was by nature somewhat formal in manner, speech, and appearance, and any violent exertion did not appear to her to coincide with her notions of what was lady-like.

Estella enjoyed a game now and then, but this evening she was far too much pre-occupied by her anticipation of what Mr. Latimer might have to say to her, to undertake any more active occupation than sitting and waiting expectantly for him.

Jonathan was already at his post, and he and Nettie together had very speedily organised the two contending factions at the tennis-nets, and were soon themselves entirely absorbed by the game.

Mary, catching sight of Mrs. Braun, who was just entering the Gardens from No. 39, went to meet the old lady, with whom she always greatly enjoyed a chat, and who to-day would no doubt have plenty to tell concerning her new boarder, who, as Mary believed, had taken up her residence at No. 39 some days previously.

“Yes, the Signorina is quite at home

with us already," said Mrs. Braun in answer to Mary's enquiries, "and very happy indeed she does make herself. Her voice, it is the most beautifullest I have ever heard, and with all that talent she has no vanity, no conceitedness, but is just as goot and as true and as innocent as a harmless calf, of who she has the loving eyes."

Mrs. Braun's tenderly sympathetic tone made up for the lack of eloquence in her somewhat dubious description of Hilda's charms.

"I am glad you find the young lady such an acquisition to your circle," said Mary. "Is she not coming into the Gardens this evening?"

"I make her promise to rejoin me in one hour," replied Mrs. Braun. "She is a goot daughter, and she is now writing to her

father a very long letter of all the news that is happen to her in this last week."

"You really should not have gone out and left the Signorina alone in the house, just as Mr. Latimer came home, mamma," said Theodosia, suddenly appearing before her startled mother, and speaking in her harshest and most reproachful tones.

Mary glanced from the angry daughter to her perplexed parent with a strong feeling of indignation rising in her mind against the former.

"You need not be anxious, dear Mrs. Braun," she said reassuringly, as the old lady was preparing to return indoors, and thus pacify her cross Dósie, "and pray don't think of moving, for Mr. Latimer has just come in by the little gate, and is sitting talking to my sister at the further end of the Gardens."

"He was shut up away in his study, and the Signorina was writing in her own room, so I could tink it no great harm to come out for a liddel fresh air myself den," the old lady said apologetically.

"You were quite right, dear Mrs. Braun," repeated Mary emphatically, and added, "I am quite sure your daughter agrees with me, and is pleased to see you enjoying a rest out of doors."

"Oh! I don't care one way or the other," retorted Theodosia still speaking snap-pishly. She was watching Estella's pleased reception of Mr. Latimer in momentarily rising wrath.

"I really think that the only way to keep girls within the bounds of decorum in these wicked days would be to lock them up altogether. It seems as if no man is safe from their attentions now that

they run about unchaperoned in all directions."

"You vill not that I lock you up, mine Dosie?" asked her mother, smiling kindly at what she thought her daughter meant as a joke.

"Oh! dear, no," cried Dosie tossing her head, "I have too much self-respect, thank heaven! ever to expose myself to the too marked attentions of any gentleman."

Mary devoutly wished that Nettie had been near enough to hear this fervid declaration, and could quite imagine the alacrity with which the mischievous Baby would mimic Theodosia's most uncalled-for exculpation.

"I have been thinking over that little matter we were speaking about, very attentively, Miss Estella," said Latimer, comfortably taking a seat on the bench the

authoress was occupying. "The first desideratum for you is permission to go to the Countess's next At-Home. If you can obtain your father's sanction, and will be present on the 16th, I will make sure that Mr. Snereton shall be there to meet you. He is the editor of *The Lyre*, you know, and publishes a Reader—*i.e.*, a serial novel, in the columns of his journal.

"He is very enterprising and prides himself on patronizing novelty of all kinds.

"If he meets you in society he cannot fail to be charmed with you, *cela va sans dire*, so pray don't deny the soft impeachment. And then, as he is a very devoted admirer of *le beau sexe*, the chances are that he will at once make some arrangements with you about your story."

Estella listened with ever-growing interest to this romantic and novel account of

the mode of procedure adopted by Mr. Latimer's editorial friend.

How very very far this gentle version was from the hard truth, the poor girl had not the remotest idea.

She had heard something of the difficulties aspiring authors occasionally meet with, and had even read not long before a heart-rending account of the weary pilgrimages, the sickening disappointments, the repeated and sometimes cruel refusals given to work which, in spite of denial and discouragement, had yet ultimately found its way into print, and been triumphantly received by an exultant and discriminating public. The brilliant finale of this tragedy of authorship had made a far deeper impression on Estella than the depressing tale of woe, the fiery ordeal of rebuffs, and dejection and hungry despondency. Those were

harrowing details written in that life's history only to work upon the "Reader's" sympathetic feelings, and to prepare him, or rather her (Estella's notion of the genus "Reader" was strictly feminine at this time), for the glorious reaction of the concluding chapters in which virtue was triumphant, modest industry rewarded, and the literary heroine promoted to the first rank among the authors of the day.

How much simpler and more inviting Mr. Latimer's account sounded.

Estella's young ambition found the notion of going, seeing, and conquering, very congenial, and resolved that this should be the course she would pursue on the night of the 16th. *Côte que coûte* she must be present at the Dowager's At-Home. On that she was fully resolved.

Having arrived at this decision, she imparted it to Mr. Latimer.

"Quite right," said he, "no end of literary folks, swells and others, will go to the Dowager's. Her ladyship's house is a recognised rendezvous for talent and eccentricity of all kinds. Very often the two go together."

"How intensely I shall enjoy all that," said Estella eagerly; "I feel as if I could scarcely await the coming of that happy day."

"Ah! Miss Estella," cried Latimer, having attentively watched the varying expressions of her bright face, "I only wish I had the chance of turning publisher for your sake, we'd make a colossal fortune together, I'm quite sure of that. You would write all the stories, and I should bring the whole strength of my commercial

experience to bear on the most effective launching of them. That would turn out well, wouldn't it now?"

"You know best, Mr. Latimer," said Estella modestly, and added, "I'm sure, if you would promise to accept Gwendolen, I heartily wish you would turn publisher or editor, or whatever the correct title may be."

"In any case, allow me most earnestly to wish you every possible success, my dear young lady," he said, and possessing himself of her hand, he pressed it heartily by way of encouragement.

Theodosia saw this friendly (?) demonstration, put her own construction upon it, and wished she was a *man* that she might swear. . . .

Nettie, whose attention had wandered from the game for some time past, had been

considerably puzzled and interested by the evidently absorbing conversation which was so entirely engrossing her sister.

The Baby's interest, however, changed into absolute dismay when she caught sight of Mr. St. Helier, who had entered the Gardens from the Grove gate, and very leisurely sauntered close up to where Estella and Mr. Latimer were indefinitely prolonging that strangely confidential conversation.

Nettie saw them putting their heads together, and noting with angry impatience that both were far too much absorbed in each other to perceive Mr. St. Helier, who took up his position at a little distance from, and at the back of, the seat occupied by that deeply-engrossed couple.

For a moment Nettie felt tempted to bid Jonathan go and whisper the news of St.

Helier's vicinity into her sister's ear. But a sudden remembrance of the lamentable failure of her last attempt at diplomatic combination checked the Baby, who feared that Johnny's awkwardness might cause Estella considerable embarrassment.

Oh! why would Stella keep staring straight into Mr. Latimer's great goggle eyes, when the man she *adored* was impatiently waiting for a glance from her, and evidently suffering under her cruel indifference?

These were poor Nettie's agitated thoughts as she, helpless herself (because she dared not stir from her post at this critical moment), watched the mischief going on within a few yards of her.

She felt as if she could willingly have taken Estella by the shoulders and shaken her into instant appreciation of the danger of her position.

Meanwhile Miss Braun, who now occasionally joined the tennis-players, had elected to do so on this occasion, probably with a view to remaining at a reasonable distance from Mr. Latimer without being palpably engaged in watching her hero.

Theodosia's presence in the opposition party made it the more imperative on Nettie not to quit the field of battle for an instant, more especially as Miss Braun's raging jealousy seemed to endow her with a novel degree of power, and was transforming her into quite a furious opponent.

Even this formidable adversary, however, was presently forgotten by Nettie, who soon became so intensely absorbed by the sentimental game those other three were all unconsciously playing before her anxious eyes, that she rushed for the ball which Theodosia had just served her, and

which *must*, if left alone, have "fallen out of court." She struck it, but alas! it grazed the net, and fell back into *her* court.

"Are you mad, Nettie, going for a ball which must have been out?" shouted Jonathan, roused to something very like anger himself by this gross carelessness on the part of his usually most skilful partner.

"I am very very sorry for your sake, Johnny," said Nettie with touching humility, "and I'll promise to do better another time." The poor child really was both angry and ashamed at the want of attention, which would give Theodosia's party the game.

And yet she felt inclined to rejoice that now, at all events, she would be free, free to rush over to her unconscious sister and warn her of St. Helier's presence.

But alas! even as she began to move, she saw Mr. Latimer possess himself of

Estella's hand and retain it, saw Theodosia stamp her foot so violently that the grass was crushed under it, and saw St. Helier turn sharply, walk straight away to the gate of the Gardens, out of them, and without so much as once looking over his shoulder, right up the incline of the Grove, where, of course, he disappeared from her view.

CHAPTER IV.

ELATION.

“OH! Stella, Stella, what have you been talking to Mr. Latimer about in that awfully confidential manner?” whispered Nettie, seizing her sister’s arm and walking away with her along the centre path of the Gardens.

“About my novel, Baby darling,” cried Estella joyfully, as she pressed a surreptitious kiss on Nettie’s plump shoulder, which looked pink and tempting under the transparent muslin of her white dress.

"You can't mean that you were talking about books all that immense time, and nodding and whispering to one another just like lovers, and—at last—actually squeezing hands. Oh! Stella, you gave me quite a turn, and as for 'mine dear Dosie,' she is ready at this very moment to pull your hair and scratch your eyes out."

"Pity she did not hear the very matter-of-fact style of conversation in which we indulged. Oh! Nettie, Mr. Latimer has been so truly kind, and given me so much hope, such delightful encouragement—"

Estella was looking into Nettie's wondering blue eyes all this while, with such intense happiness shining in her own, that Nettie instantly became most sympathetic.

"Is he going to get it printed for you at once?" she enquired, her interest

in, decidedly exceeding her knowledge of, literary details.

"He is going to introduce and recommend me to the right sort of editor," said Estella; "and that, you know, is more than half the battle."

Nettie did not know anything at all about it, but very readily took for granted that everything was quite as it should be, since Estella was evidently satisfied.

Indeed, her sister's manifest content was so delightful to the Baby's loving heart, that it moved her to more profound consideration than any one would have deemed the giddy little woman capable of.

She certainly longed to startle and to scold Estella by revealing the fact of St. Helier's appearance to her, and reproaching her for being too much engrossed by Mr. Latimer to bestow even a passing glance on

the disconsolate barrister. But it was so delightful to see Estella gay and bright once again, far brighter indeed than she had ever seemed since that memorable musical afternoon at St. Helier's, that Nettie discreetly forbore from uttering the words which she knew would immediately damp Estella's ardour and reduce her elated spirits from boiling-point to zero.

No possible good could result from her betrayal of St. Helier's appearance and abrupt departure, Nettie concluded, and so she actually abstained from mentioning the matter at all. A proof of forbearing discretion on the girl's part, from which many an inconsiderate "woman of the world" might learn a beneficial lesson, as regards the reckless imparting of "confidences" which can only serve to distress those on whom they are bestowed.

Estella, in blissful ignorance of Mr. St. Helier's entrance and exit in her immediate vicinity, was far gayer this evening than her sisters had seen her during the last fortnight.

Hilda had joined Mrs. Braun and Mary by this time, and when Estella, Nettie, and Jonathan also brought chairs, and settled near that group, they formed a very happy and a somewhat boisterous conclave.

Hilda was also in excellent spirits, and made them all laugh with her quaint accounts of some of the official ceremonies and State parties in Rome, at which her presence had been commanded.

"Not for myself I was wanted, you must be very sure," she said smiling; "it was all and only for the voice that is in me. That was the thing to be honoured with a ceremonious invitation. And if it could

have presented itself in a box or in a marionette, it would have been quite as well received, no doubt, and certainly made far more welcome than now it necessitated a place and a bow for a very useless and not at all an amusing young woman."

"But didn't that sort of treatment make you angry and rebellious, Signorina?" asked Nettie, looking wonderfully irate herself.

"Cara mia, for why?" said the Italian, with the utmost good temper. "I know well, many persons indeed have told me, that here in London, in the grand society, it is the same, and more than the same.

"Gran' Dio! that troubles me not at all. It is my voice they will invite and listen to, and compliment, and be amiable with; it is not at all me. And I am glad for my

voice. It is good, and I love it to be made so welcome. The great people do not wish to honour me when they praise my voice, but whether they or I will or will not, I also must rejoice."

"Signorina," said Nettie coaxingly, as she crept close to Hilda's side; "tell us something about your carnival, *do*. Of all the things I most desire to see, a carnival seems to me quite the most tempting. Isn't it so?"

"It is a very gay, sometimes a mad and foolish, time in Rome," began Hilda, and stopping herself abruptly, exclaimed — "Madame Braun—see, there is Mr. St. Helier at your drawing-room window. Permit you that I go to see him?"

"I will come with you, mine child," said Mrs. Braun hastily rising. She had not forgotten her daughter's previous indigna-

tion, and was very anxious to avoid its recurrence, by ultra attention to those proprieties which Dosie was always lecturing her about.

"Please, do you stay sitting out here," Hilda entreated, turning to the Norman girls.

"It is not yet eight o'clock, and I will persuade Mr. St. Helier to come back into the Gardens with us."

They sat and waited patiently for a long half-hour, but Hilda had either forgotten her promise or not been able to induce St. Helier to aid her in the performance of it, for neither of them appeared again that evening.

The fact was that Mr. St. Helier's position *vis-à-vis* the Normans was such a very perplexing one to himself, since he had not the least idea what prohibitive steps that irate

parent might or might not have taken, that he preferred remaining on the comfortably neutral ground of Mrs. Braun's drawing-room carpet, where he felt himself both welcome and secure.

A little later, when Hilda's glorious voice resounded and was heard by the girls lingering out in the gardens, Estella said,

"It would be useless to expect Mr. St. Helier out here when such a powerful attraction is keeping him indoors." She spoke with resignation, but quite without bitterness. It was only natural, she thought, that he, who confessedly adored good singing, should forget all the rest of the world when he had the chance of listening to Hilda. . . .

It was Jonathan's happy thought which brought Estella back into a pleasanter train of reflection than that which had just

been so completely absorbing her, for Jonathan said,

“Mr. Latimer wants to turn publisher, and all for your sake, Miss Estella; he has the very highest opinion of your talents, and though he has not seen your book, he says he feels convinced that it must be a clever and a most original work.”

“Did he really say that, Johnny?” asked Estella brightening again.

“Those were his very words, I do assure you,” answered Jonathan impressively, and turning to Mary, whom he regarded as the wisest and the best of women, he added,

“Mr. Latimer wished me to tell you his opinion of your sister’s talents, in confidence, Miss Mary; but I could not resist letting you all know what he said at the same time, and he is so clever, and so good a judge, you know, that praise from him means far more than it would from an ordinary individual.”

“I am sure, dear Johnny, we are all very much obliged to your friend for his flattering opinion,” said Mary, with her quiet smile, “but, for my part, I confess I am a little at a loss where his great judgment is shown in this instance. How can he know anything of the merits or demerits of Estella’s writings, when he has only read them in her own bright eyes as yet?”

“Mary!” cried Estella remonstrating, and Nettie echoed, “Pretty Poll, where’s your propriety?—we’re all quite shocked.”

However that might be, Jonathan was satisfied, for he had brought the smiles back into Estella’s face, which had of late pained him by its ultra gravity.

Mr. Norman himself had inwardly fretted, and been quite anxious, about the evident depression of the daughter whose brilliancy and high spirit he had always keenly admired.

He feared that she had in some way become acquainted with the disastrous results of his interview with Mr. St. Helier, and certainly breathed freer when he saw her eyes sparkle once again, and noticed that warm flush of colour on her cheeks, which had been looking very wan and white of late.

He listened with particular satisfaction to her gay laughter to-night, and also to the light-hearted prattle in which she joined Nettie, as they both gave their father a very vivid description of the luxurious splendour with which the Shoddy-Princess had installed herself in her new residence.

Estella's sudden change of mood was not evanescent either. The trying events which had so thoroughly unsettled her during the past anxious days had taught her an important lesson.

She had discovered for herself, poor child, that no brain-work can be satisfactorily accomplished while the thoughts of the would-be worker are engaged on extraneous matters.

As long as she was pondering and wondering about St. Helier, his private affairs and her own, the novel was utterly neglected. She constantly caught herself scribbling *Everard* or *St. Helier*, upon her blotting paper, encircling the beloved names with marvellous flourishes, which emulated artistic designs in their scroll-like involutions.

At other times, when thoughts and hand refused to obey the fitful inspiration of her distraught fancy, she would spend hours in endeavouring to trace a line of profile on the margin of her manuscript, a line which, after continual repetition and impatient alteration, she sometimes succeeded in

making like the face which haunted her incessantly, the face for which she was daily looking as she sat in the Gardens with her note-book, and always looking in vain. . . .

She was very indignant with herself when she realised how much time she was in the habit of wasting over these idle fancies and erratic designs, but it was not until after another "business conversation" with Mr. Latimer that she became thoroughly aware of the absolute necessity of steady and attentive work.

On the occasion of their second interview in the Gardens, on the day following that first engrossing conversation, Mr. Latimer was in a far more practical mood, and gave the would-be authoress some useful hints, which were far more likely to further her ambitious designs than the fulsome compliments and ill-advised flattery of which he had erstwhile been so prodigal.

Now he took the trouble to explain to her that there were certain accepted forms which constituted a quasi-literary code, and these it would be incumbent on her to observe as strictly as possible.

He instructed her as to the method which was desirable in the division and arrangement of her chapters, and further impressed upon her that the high and mighty authorities, yclept editors, required everything to be made as easy and comfortable as possible for their critical eyes, both mental and physical.

Estella having listened with wrapt attention to these practical hints, resolved to profit by them, and told her smiling Mentor of her intention.

"Illegibility is a crime with which no one shall ever charge me, on that point I am quite determined," she said, and plead-

ing her desire to return to her work, she left Mr. Latimer somewhat abruptly.

Not soon enough, however, to save herself from being again perceived in close confabulation with him, by the jealous eyes of Mr. St. Helier, who had taken up his position at the drawing-room window of No. 39, where Hilda was rehearsing a new scena for his especial benefit.

Estella settled to her work now, full of fresh ideas.

She was determined to copy out the one hundred and ten pages already so neatly and legibly written, and in so doing she found that many alterations and possible improvements suggested themselves to her.

All this so completely engrossed her that she found no idle moments now, in which her thoughts could wander into those treacherous realms of fancy which were

peopled exclusively by visions of St. Helier, nor did her pen now career vaguely over blotting-paper and clear margin.

She began to feel very happy about Gwendolen once again, and her old faith in the ultimate result of her work had returned to her.

She was quite prepared in fact, at a hint from Mr. Latimer, to hand him her MS. for revision, and to hear his opinion about her work. She felt sure now that he would be able conscientiously to praise and encourage her.

But before she happened to meet the "great man" again, her first volume was so nearly completed that she deferred submitting it to him until it really was a *fait accompli*.

"And how is our novel progressing?" asked Mr. Latimer, seating himself by

Estella's side on one occasion, while she was as usual occupied with her "note-book" in the Gardens. This note-book, however, was already a preparation for the second volume.

"You have quite inspired me, and I have worked with renewed hope and courage since the last practical lesson you gave me, Mr. Latimer," said Estella, looking up at him with so grateful a smile on her lips, and in her eloquent eyes, that he again wondered how it was he had not previously remarked this clever girl's absolute beauty.

"You may depend upon my doing all I possibly can to serve you, in any and every sense," he said blandly, and met her earnest gaze with so pleasantly encouraging a smile, that Estella in her turn wondered what could possibly have induced her to consider Mr. Latimer in any sense objectionable, as she certainly had done at one time.

CHAPTER V.

THE DOWAGER'S "AT-HOME."

FROM Mr. Latimer, through Johnny Pry, a report was spread in the Gardens that the Honourable Benjamin Raynewater had returned home unexpectedly, and that the Dowager Countess had killed the fatted calf on his arrival, and in every sense received him like the proverbial prodigal son. Morally speaking, young Benjamin bore a striking family likeness to that oft-quoted ne'er-do well.

This news added to the general excitement with which the invited and the unin-

vited Grenfellians looked forward to the 16th.

The "At-Home" now assumed a special character, as being the public celebration of the youngest son's return to the maternal nest.

The girls at No. 40 were all in a flutter, at the prospect of Estella's *début* in aristocratic circles.

Mr. Norman had not yielded very willingly to his daughter's entreaties on Estella's behalf.

He was very well pleased that the Countess should have selected the clever one among his girls as a fit recipient of a card of invitation, to a party at which talent of all kinds was warmly welcomed, but he could not bring himself to approve of the chaperon appointed to introduce his daughter into a circle where the aristocracy of intel-

lect was supposed to vie with that of birth.

But what parent could have withstood the united pleading and coaxing of three such winsome girls as the Normans ?

They now cordially united their varying forces, and brought them to bear on the tender mercies of their indulgent father. Of course he yielded in the end, and from that moment Nettie's days were spent in a whirl of excited anticipation, as to what Estella would wear, how she would look, etc. etc.

Estella herself desired to wear a maize dress, the fancy for which colour was probably suggested by a fact Hilda had confided to her. Mr. St. Helier considered maize essentially the tint most becoming to brunettes.

That this was an ancient decree in the

code of fashion had never affected Estella, but as soon as she heard that Mr. St. Helier endorsed the dictum she instantly desired to prove the truth of his words in her own person.

Her sisters pooh-pooled the idea utterly, which made Estella the more resolute.

But one morning she was summoned to No. 39 by a three-cornered note from Hilda, of which many now passed between the girls.

The Italian received her visitor in her her own room.

"Carissima mia Estella !" she cried, looking radiant as she embraced the friend she found more and more *simpatica*.

"You look very pleased, Hilda," remarked Estella smiling ; "what has happened ? Has Mr. Arrowsmith made proposals to you already ?" Mr. Giacomo

Arrowsmith was the ostensible proprietor of the Great Diamond Opera House, though in reality he was but the factotum of young Lord Goselyngge, whose colossal fortune and enthusiastic admiration for operatic music gave him a position of the utmost importance in the dramatic and lyric world.

“Nothing so magnificent as the mere hint of an engagement has happened to me,” said Hilda smiling. “But I have had a very pleasant surprise; look here, I show to you.”

As she spoke she pointed to a large *carton*, and with trembling fingers hastened to display its contents to Estella. The *carton* had arrived from Paris that morning, and contained a triumph of Parisian art in the shape of a pale maize *costume de bal*.

“A present from Mr. St. Helier?” asked Estella, anticipating the information before which she inwardly quaked already.

"You might almost so call it," said Hilda, whose face was flushed with pleasure. "It is he who certainly has had all the considering and all the trouble of it." She continued, "As soon as Mrs. Vivian asked me to go with her, I begged Mr. St. Helier to tell me what I must wear on this occasion. I did not see you that day, Stella, or I would have begged you to direct me, as your toilet is not the same here as I know in Rome.

"Mr. St. Helier, who I am sure has the best taste in the world, remembered me of a dress I had at a great 'reception official' in Rome last January. 'That will be most suitable,' he said, and I thought no more of it.

"Now this morning a letter comes from my kindest and best of fathers, who has heard of this *soirée* at the Countess's, and who

tells me has requested Mr. St. Helier, who has much acquaintance in Paris, to command me a new dress of the corn colour, which most becomes me. The dear father writes 'he hopes it will arrive in good time, and make me look as pretty as he would wish to see me.'

"You know he loves me very much, the *caro padre*, and he is most proud of his one child. May God protect his beloved white head!"

Hilda folded her hands reverently as she uttered words which came as a prayer from her heart.

When Estella looked up at her she saw with surprise that the eloquent eyes had filled with sudden tears.

"We are two happy girls, Stella, you and I," said Hilda presently, "we have both a father on earth, and we have both a father in Heaven!"

Estella took the Signorina's hands in hers, and kissed them reverently.

Her heart also was full to overflowing, but with a far keener emotion than filial Hilda's.

"Mr. St. Helier is very good and considerate to you, Hilda," she said after a pause.

"It is well to have so true a friend."

"You say truly," answered Hilda, and thoughtfully added, "It is far better to have an independent friend like that, than a lover like poor Ronald who is necessarily under the control of a money-proud woman like his mother."

"Did you ever think of marrying Ronald?" asked Estella approaching this important theme for the first time, and somewhat alarmed by her own temerity.

"I can scarcely say what I thought, or what might have happened," replied Hilda

quietly, "had there been no Mrs. Vivian to contend with. Now I am—oh! so thankful it is all finished," she cried, clasping her hands and lifting the square chin which gave such a resolute look to her young face.

"Ah! don't let us speak of these things, I have much better to think of now," she cried and, pointing to the ball dress, added, "You have not said how you like it, Stella?"

"It is perfect, 'lovely as a dream,' to quote Nettie; and you will look lovely in it," she added, with that ready admiration for others which always distinguished her.

* * * *

That evening Estella, once more in consultation with her sisters, said, "I'll give up the idea of a maize dress and wear white as you suggest, Mary."

"Father told Polly he would make you

a present of a new frock himself, in honour of the occasion," cried Nettie, "and oh ! do let us go up to Regent-street to see about it. I wish you belonged to the ladies' club, Estella ; you're literary and ought to be a member. Then you could introduce us, and we should get a delightful 'feed' in the prettiest room in London."

"What do know about any clubs, Baby ?" asked Mary laughing.

"Quite enough to make me wish one of us was a member, if we can't all three be elected. You and I are eligible, I am sure, Poll, though we are not so clever as Stella."

"Failing the club, where can we go ?" enquired Mary laughing, "I very much object to the stuffy confectioner's places."

"We'll go to the Belgravian," said Nettie decisively, "Mrs. Toegoode says that's the nicest restaurant in Regent-street, and

ladies can go there with or without gentlemen. If you girls are at all nervous about it, I'll get Johnny to come and chaperon us—if father don't object, that is," she added with a sudden remembrance of the failure of her attempted *management* on a previous occasion.

Father did not object this time, and after a very satisfactory visit to the "Belgravian" Estella's lily-white garment was selected and purchased to the exceeding delight of Nettie, who was quite as ready to rejoice for her sister as on her own account.

On the evening of the 16th Nettie's excitement had reached its culminating point. She ran up and down stairs a dozen times, in her eagerness to forestall any possible want of Estella's.

"Oh! how I wish I was going too," she cried, as she eagerly placed the last spray of jessamine in Estella's dark hair.

"Doesn't she look quite too exquisitely lovely, Poll?" the Baby added, and the regretful pout on her lips changed to a smile of honest delight at her sister's beauty.

"Your dress is perfect, Estella," said Mary in her solemn way, and you are looking your very best; I sincerely hope you will enjoy yourself," she added, lending emphasis to the wish by the gentle kiss she pressed on her sister's brow.

"I promise not to crush you the least little bit, but I *must* hug you, you darling!" cried Nettie kneeling at Estella's feet and flinging her arms about her sister's waist.

Rising again, she said, "Promise you'll tell me everything, and try and remember what everybody wears, won't you, Stella?"

"I'll do all I can to satisfy you, dear Baby," said Estella, "and believe me I'd

like it all a thousand times better if you were coming too."

"I'll do the next best thing to that," said Nettie laughing, "I'll carry your ladyship's train to the brougham for you when you leave, and I'll sit up to receive you when you come home."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, you wilful child," said Mary severely.

"Handsome is as handsome does," cried Nettie, and added in a startled tone, "I believe that was the door-bell, Stella, it is nearly ten o'clock too."

As Estella was crossing the hall, Nettie called her back once more.

"Be sure you talk to Mr. Ronald," she said, "and do please make him promise to come into the Gardens to-morrow. I want to enlist him in our tennis-set."

"I'll tell him if I see him," answered

Estella smiling, and gathering up her trained skirts she entered the carriage, in which Mrs. Toegoode had suggested that Miss Norman should call for her at ten o'clock precisely.

"Although we have only to drive down to the other end of the Gardens," Adela-ida had said, "we shall be wearing all our finery and white shoes and all that, and, in fact, I never do go out in the evening unless I have a carriage to take me."

"Of course, Estella will call for you in a brougham at whatever time you choose to appoint," Mary had replied. And Mrs. Toegoode, mollified, decreed ten o'clock.

Estella was at the door of No. 3 punctual to the minute, but it was nearly eleven before the authoress had managed to secure her dress, and the manifold ribbons and

laces with which she had elected to adorn herself.

The Countess Dowager had taken up her position as hostess, close to the drawing-room door, long before Adela-ida, who was always unpunctual and untidy, had managed to close the gaping breaches in her gown by skewer-like pins.

The Honourable Benjamin, the prodigal son, was close to his mother's side, feeling himself very much at home again in the shelter of her gorgeous brocade.

He was a slim, pale, insignificant youth, whose only attraction, if so it could be called, lay in a quantity of long silky curling hair, of palest flaxen hue.

"He is still very delicate, poor boy," his mother said of him, with true compassion in her look and tone.

The natural maternal instinct which dic-

tates tenderness to the frailest offspring had survived many extreme changes in the temper of the old Countess. She held rank and title in her own right now, but time had been when both were generously conferred upon her (social Bohemian as she then was), by the infatuated young earl, her husband. The eldest son, and present earl, physically robust and mentally unyielding, had ever inspired his mother with more awe than affection. But little Ben, who was weak and tender by nature, had crept very closely into the much-tried heart of the "eccentric" old woman.

She was a remarkable woman certainly, this Dowager Countess of Dewminster, and carried her years, of which there must have been sixty at least, with an easy grace that started all beholders.

She also had a quantity of pale flaxen

hair, in which neither roots nor tell-tale partings were discernible, only innumerable love-locks, coquettishly falling on to the delicately-traced eyebrows, while other and longer love-locks, heaped and piled up in reckless profusion, sat like a crown on her "aristocratic" head.

On her cheeks, and on her lips, lay the brilliant tints of youth, and in her restless eyes, which neither shading nor colouring could rescue from the cavernous setting into which relentless time had forced them, the vital spark of an undaunted spirit glittered still.

"All my Bohemians are coming to-night, for your particular benefit, Ben," she said, with the cynical hoarse laugh which in an ordinary woman would have been voted vulgar.

In her ladyship it was "eccentric," like all her attributes.

"Coming from a land of the 'rough and ready'" she continued, "I thought you would feel more at home with metropolitan specimens of that class, than with the ultra respectable 'dullabilities,' whose society your conservative brother affects."

"I shall be pleased, if you are, mother," said Benjamin kindly. He rather liked the continued enjoyment of that fatted calf.

"We shall certainly be amused to-night," continued her ladyship laughing, "and after all, that's the only thing in this world that's worth the trouble of living for. When I have an 'Omnium Gatherum' here, I enjoy myself as I do at the theatre; better, perhaps, because here the farce is played for my especial benefit. Had I known you

would be back in time for this *fête*, I should not have restricted Mrs. Adela-ida in the number of her mountebanks. Still, a pretty sprinkling of them may always be found among my guests, who have broken away from the shelter of Addie's changeable patronage, and taken root at my parties on their own account. Ah! speak of the——”

Her ladyship checked herself suddenly, and extended her hand in reluctant response to the red paw offered her by an eager guest, who was following the announcement of his oleaginous name into the room.

“Dr. Hezekiah Poole!”

Doctor Poole was one of the “*had beens*” as regarded the gushing patronage of the Honourable Mrs. Toegoode, whom he had loyally attended through many a trying and wearisome illness.

The only fees he had ever received for his

constant attentions to Adela-ida, were introductions to two of her party-giving friends.

What wonder that the doctor, who had social ambitions, should have made the best use he could of this *sub-rosa* remuneration? Whenever he heard (and he always contrived to ascertain the fact in good time) that either the Countess or Lady Shorne intended to "receive" on a certain evening, he made a point of presenting himself as early as possible, a bumptious aspirant for the welcome not very readily accorded him.

Poor Dr. Poole had been somewhat severely handled by those small, wiry, clever fingers of Mrs. 'Toegoode's.

She had used, and lauded him to the skies, while she was the victim of some physical suffering, and under the influence of her first attack of *gushing* fever.

But, after the illness, the sudden ardour of friendship cooled, and Dr. Poole was quietly—dropped, as so many of the impulsive authoress's friends had been dropped before.

This evening the fussy little doctor quite dreaded Adela-ida's arrival, being in considerable doubt as to the reception she might give him. He would be only too thankful, he thought, if she would give him her finger tips now, and yet a few months ago he might have been sure of the warm pressure of her hand, and the most cordial smiles of greeting. His doubts were soon solved, for at this moment,

"The Honourable Mrs. Toegoode and Miss Norman" were announced, and the former bowed frigidly to the doctor as she passed him.

Estella, though unusually grave, certainly

looked beautiful, and so the dowager told her with a smile of appreciation.

The Honourable Benjamin entirely agreed with his noble mamma, and wondered if the girl had money ?

But then she wouldn't be here, was the internal response.

"Will you take a turn through the rooms, Miss Norman?" he asked her, and was gratified to feel the light touch of her little hand upon his arm.

Adela-ida, whose auburn tresses were redolent of macassar, had pinned on a gorgeous garment for this occasion. It was made of green tarlatan, of that peculiarly bright tint known as arsenical, and trimmed with garlands of silver holly-leaves, a little tarnished now, since they had been used last Christmas to decorate the chandeliers and looking-glasses at home.

"Where's Toegoode, Addie?" enquired the Dowager.

"He will be here directly," said Addie apologetically, as she saw the ominous frown upon the Countess's brow.

"I hope he will bring you a clean tucker for your frock," said her ladyship crossly.

"My dear Dow," the authoress began hurriedly, but the Dowager would listen to no excuses. Adela-ida, well accustomed to snubs from the Countess, and quite willing to take "the good with the bad," as she philosophically explained to her intimates, did not waste any time in brooding over this last insult, but allowed herself to be diverted by the amusing chatter of a theatrical critic who arrived at this moment.

Estella, who had heard the ungracious

snub to Adela-ida, secretly resented it, and felt very indignant with that spiteful old Countess.

The girl not only admired Adela-ida's literary talents, but also felt a very sincere compassion for the poor hardworking authoress who spent her days and half her nights in utilizing her brain-power for the maintenance of an idle husband. Estella had by this time heard many strange stories *à propos* of Mrs. Toegoode's chequered career.

But finding the authoress always pleasant and amiable, as far as she was personally concerned, Estella determined to defend her literary friend's conduct wherever she heard it impugned, and could not be made to use a harsher word than "eccentric," where Mrs. Toegoode was concerned. To

bear malice was certainly not a failing of Adela-ida's.

She presently noticed that an oppressive cloud of dulness seemed to weigh upon the general spirits of the heterodox assembly, now crowding fast and furiously into the Countess's spacious apartments.

"We must get up a diversion of some sort, the people are suffocating," Mrs. Toegoode whispered to her friend the critic, and approaching the Countess she touched her ladyship's arm deferentially.

"I had better ask L'Estrange to recite," she suggested, "it makes a diversion, and people can talk all the same."

The Countess, who had been constantly and assiduously occupied in receiving her guests, was really grateful when "Addie" came to her with so feasible a proposition for the entertainment of the multitude.

"Go tell him I shall be glad," she said, and the first smile poor Addie had seen this evening dispelled the gloom on her patroness's face.

L'Estrange, an impecunious actor of strangely unappreciated merit, was only too glad of the opportunity now offered to him of distinguishing himself.

Presently Estella, not much entertained by the platitudes of the Honourable Benjamin, was suddenly startled into attention by the sight of a ponderous, swarthy man, wearing long black locks and a sickly smile, who stood up in the centre of the room, and, after violently clearing his throat, commenced in a voice that was still decidedly husky, to recite "The May Queen."

"If you're waking, call me early," etc., etc., declaimed Mr. L'Estrange, trying to

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make up for the thickness of his utterance by most energetic gesticulation.

Estella's eyes, directed by her restless thoughts, soon strayed from this affected mountebank and settled on the door again, the one point on which her interest had really been concentrated throughout the evening.

At this moment her patient expectation was rewarded, for she perceived St. Helier, as he entered and turned to shake hands with his hostess.

"Would he see her and come to her?" wondered Estella, thankful to find that she might watch this last arrival undisturbed, since the Honourable Benjamin's attention was engaged by an old gentleman who had approached, and was buttonholing him at this moment.

St. Helier was too far away to be con-

scious of Estella's wistful eyes. Indeed, he also was occupied in looking for somebody.

"Not for me," thought poor Estella with a sudden pang, as his glance passed over without resting upon her. Indeed he had not remarked her, as he was on the look-out for a maize dress, and Estella's simple white one became part of the rainbow-cloud of tissues, in which that ripe-corn colour had not yet found its place.

Estella did not know all this, but a sensitive heart is apt to divine that which most elates or depresses it, intuitively.

It was thus Estella realised that to-night St. Helier would have eyes for Hilda alone. . . .

"Do you know those two men who are now talking to my mother?" whispered

Mr. Raynewater, directing Estella's attention to the latest arrivals.

"I know neither," said Estella, and with a polite endeavour to appear interested, added, "the first is a very remarkable-looking man."

"Most ladies call him *handsome*," said Benjamin, "they certainly pay him every possible attention."

Estella opined that this was a novel dispensation of the relative duties of the sexes.

"And has this paragon a name?" she asked.

"You will best know him by his vocation," said Mr. Raynewater, "he is the editor of the *Sphere*, the smartest and best coached of all the London papers."

Estella now looked at "the paragon" with quite a new interest. So this, she

thought, was a real live editor, and a sensible editor too, since he introduced novels into his pages among the social and political gossip for which they were famous.

At any other time the girl would have felt and expressed vehement delight at such a *rencontre*, for this was the very man who might accept Gwendolen some day . . . if only St. Helier would help her to finish it—would he *ever*?

She caught sight of his pale refined face again now, and an almost irresistible longing possessed her to turn her back on Mr. Raynewater, and boldly make her way to where St. Helier stood preoccupied, but still alone.

"Behold the *Sphere's* rival," announced Benjamin, pointing out a small delicate-looking man whose appearance contrasted

strangely with the herculean proportions of the other editor.

“Who is the little man?” asked Estella without much caring to hear the reply.

“This man owns the *Lyre*,” said Raynewater, much gratified by Estella’s apparent interest in his conversational efforts.

The *Lyre’s spécialité* is alternately to chaff and snarl at the *Sphere*, which, calmly conscious of its established superiority, can afford to tolerate these harmless attacks with a grin of polite indifference.

“But they are not enemies, are they?” enquired Estella, as she watched the rivals cordially shaking hands.

“Oh! dear, no,” said Benjamin laughing, “they are sensible men of the world, both of them, and as such, quite aware that life is too short for quarrelling. They have determined to take it as pleasantly as they

can — the bitter with the sweet, no doubt."

"Talking of sweets, here's Honey Latimer," he added, brightening as he cordially welcomed the honorary secretary of the Great Anti-Bee Company.

Estella, pleasantly mindful of her last interview with Mr. Latimer, greeted him with a charming smile.

Mr. St. Helier, whose roving eyes happened to light upon her radiant face at this moment, noted the smile, and again wondered if there could be any tie between those two?

CHAPTER VI.

REACTION.

A SUDDEN and utterly unaccountable rage possessed St. Helier, as that suspicion of some deeper understanding between Estella and Mr. Latimer again flashed into his mind.

With a feeling of savage disappointment he turned his head away, and—confronted Hilda.

She had but just entered the room, and her appearance, clad as she was in the exquisite maize costume, was creating a decided sensation.

St. Helier felt really grateful when he beheld so attractive a diversion for his troubled thoughts. He hastened to meet the Signorina, whom he greeted with eager smiles and compliments.

Estella saw it all, and smiled—smiled all the more as she turned to Mr. Latimer again, and with an amount of animation which surprised herself, entered into conversation with that gentleman.

“By Jove, she is a splendid creature!” thought Latimer, glancing at her shining eyes and flushing cheeks in undisguised admiration.

A sudden recklessness possessed the girl. She chattered on in a high tone, then laughed aloud, hoping St. Helier would hear her and feel shocked.

Yes, she would far rather know she shocked him, than tolerate the notion that

he was totally indifferent to what she said or did or left undone.

As she had succeeded in attracting the surprised attention of most of the people in her vicinity, she could not resist glancing across at St. Helier, to see if he also had remarked her.

But Hilda was evidently engrossing all his attention, as she eagerly spoke to him on some subject which seemed to interest both of them.

All the time Hilda was speaking, however, she was eagerly scanning the crowd about her, for a familiar face she longed to see.

"Ah! there is Estella!" she cried suddenly, and placing her hand on her companion's arm, drew him across the room to where Estella was standing.

The girls shook hands warmly, and whis-

pered pretty little compliments to one another, which had the rare merit of absolute sincerity.

Estella laid her icily-cold hand into St. Helier's warm fingers, but not one word could she utter in response to his cool "How are you?"

An ominous hush-sh now passed from lip to lip, and temporary silence being thus obtained, the air was rent asunder by a vocal outburst uttered by a delicate-looking Italian, who was appealing to "all the gods" in the gloomiest of *bassi profondi*.

As soon as this melancholy exordium was over, Mrs. Vivian approached the Signorina, and by the express desire of "her ladyship the Countess Dowager," requested Hilda to favour them all with one of her bravura airs.

"What shall I sing?" asked Hilda, ner-

vously appealing to Estella. But Estella did not hear her friend, for she was listening to Mr. Latimer, who proposed then and there to introduce her to the editor of the *Lyre*.

Ronald Vivian, who seldom lost a word which fell from Hilda's lips, now approached her and entreated for the "Jewel" song, from Faust.

Hilda, relieved at not having to decide for herself, nodded acquiescence, and took the arm her modest adorer tremblingly offered, as he asked if he might be permitted to conduct her to the piano.

Signor Scuro was installed there, and Hilda having uttered the first words of her recitative, remembered none of the people about her, but surrendered herself with a genuine and delicious enthusiasm to the untroubled joy of hearing the thrilling tones

of the glorious voice, which, as she was wont so gratefully to say, "the good God had given her."

The silence which reigned while Hilda sang, was by no means compulsory. Each member of the motley crowd was more or less amazed and delighted by the power and sweetness of the young Italian's sympathetic voice.

Even young Lord Goselyngge, whose colossal fortune, and well-known mania for the lyric art, gave him facilities for experiments and a wide experience in operative ventures, stood spell-bound by the melodious tones of Hilda's fresh voice, which fell upon his ear as he entered the room.

Of Lord Goselyngge, it might truly be said that he was "not such a fool as he looked," and he was certainly and very rapidly aware that this was no common

singer on whom he had fortunately lighted, on this his first appearance in Great Grenfell Gardens.

Lord Goselyngge had accepted the Countess's invitation with an unexpressed idea that he was going to visit a "menagerie"—or rather a raree-show,—and, therefore, his lordship was rather startled to find that the first tones that fell on his ear in this assemblage of "savages," were the utterances of so clear and highly-trained a soprano, as neither he nor his factotum, Mr. Giacomo Arrowsmith, had ever been able to discover as yet, in all their searches for a veritable *prima-donna*.

"Old Scuro was right in his judgment, as usual," thought the titled head of the great Diamond Opera Company, perceiving the signor at the piano, and taking in "the situation" at a glance.

Complimenting the Countess on her talent, in securing an attraction which even *he* envied her, Lord Goselyngge approached the piano, and having been duly presented to the Signorina Santarelli, soon entered into a lively conversation with her.

The listless crowd was moving to and fro in the spacious apartments, commending, smiling, smirking, sneering, as the case might be, until the announcement of supper put them all in motion and sent them doorwards in a consequent stream.

Latimer, who had patiently awaited his opportunity, now hurried towards Estella and offered her his arm.

By common consent they made their way towards the further end of the supper-room, where Mr. Snereton, the editor of the *Lyre*, had already established himself, and was surrounded by a *côterie* of admiring disciples.

Mrs. Toegoode, always eager to pick up crumbs of information from editorial sources, was close at hand, and so was Mr. L'Estrange, who hoped to see certain "Dramatic Essays" he had written, appear in the *Lyre*.

"Mr. Latimer tells me you are writing a novel, Miss Norman?" said Mr. Snereton, with an amused smile of enquiry.

The attack was so sudden, and was followed by so many other point-blank questions, that the aspiring authoress was frightened out of all coherence.

She did manage, after some absurd hesitation, to inform the condescending editor that she had nearly completed the first volume of a novel, which she intended to call "Gwendolen."

"That title is bad," said the man of experience. "Talk to Mrs. Toegoode, my child—she can put you into the way

of *fetching* the public, and it's quite a *spécialité* of Adela-ida's to christen her three-deckers effectively.

"One moment, Mr. Snereton," said the successful authoress, approaching the patronising editor with a bland smile. "I want to introduce my husband to you;" and seeing the look of surprise on the face of the proprietor of the *Lyre*, she added, "I daresay you have considered Mr. Toegoode a sort of male 'Mrs. Harris' hitherto; but here he is to speak for himself."

Here he was, certainly ("and not much to look at, either," as Mr. Snereton remarked, *sotto voce*), but he did not choose to speak to anyone but his enterprising wife.

To her he said, scowling as he spoke, "It's high time we got home. If you want me to wait for you you'd better look sharp,

for I've to be off to Newmarket first train in the morning."

It was a peculiarity of Mr. Toegoode's that he was always going to be off to see either races or trainers, and that he could never manage to find sufficient cash for his travelling expenses without applying to poor hard-working Mrs. Addie for it.

His coming to fetch her from the party to night was a concession made solely in reference to the money he would require her to give him for his journey.

She had received ten guineas for a story handed in only yesterday, and those ten guineas her husband was determined to secure to-night.

"If you are ready, dear Estella," said the authoress in a far meeker tone than she was wont to use, "we may as well be going, as Mr. Toegoode does not like to be kept

waiting—men never do, you know,” she whispered gently.

“I am quite ready,” said Estella, with an odd tightening feeling at her heart, which almost choked her.

She had just caught sight of Hilda as she sat at the supper-table, radiant with success. A bright flush was on her face, and her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

Lord Goselyngge sat on one side of her, St. Helier on the other. Ronald Vivian, opposite, was watching her with looks of undisguised admiration.

“Poor Nettie,” thought Estella—then added with an audible sigh, “and poor me!”

She had already followed Mrs. Toegoode out of the supper-room, when she felt her hand clasped closely in that of a person who

must have followed on her footsteps. It was St. Helier.

“Your father has forbidden you to speak to me?” he whispered hurriedly, “but *must* you be so cruel?”

Before Estella had even time to realise what was being said to her, he had left her side again and returned to the room which held “that irresistible attraction. . . . So thought the poor child with such bitterness in her heart as she had never felt before.

Mr. and Mrs. Toegoode had hurried on. She followed quickly.

In a few moments the short drive was over, and Estella was standing alone upon the doorstep of No. 40.

As soon as the door was opened, Estella hastened towards the dining-room, but before she had time to reach it, Nettie was out in the passage to meet her.

"Oh! darling, you are home sooner than I had dared to expect," cried Nettie, flinging her arms around her sister's shoulders, and thus half leading half dragging her into the dining-room.

"Now, Stella, tell me all about it, was it very delightful? I'm not a bit sleepy, and should like to sit up all night and listen to your account of the glories you have seen."

Estella stood pale, silent, unresponsive.

"Dearest, what is it, you don't mean to say you have not enjoyed yourself?" gasped Nettie, gazing at her sister in unconcealed amazement.

"Enjoyed myself?" echoed Estella, with unmistakeable bitterness in her tone. "Oh! Nettie, Nettie! I never spent so wretched an evening in all my life." As she spoke, the rush of her late experiences seemed to

overwhelm her, to the exclusion of all comforting thoughts.

The noisy indifferent crowd, her anxious waiting, his coming, the subsequent disappointment, her desperate struggle to force his attention by the hollow mockery of her seeming gaiety ; all these, her trials and tribulations, came crowding upon her, and culminated with the cry,

“I am so very, very unhappy, Nettie. I wish I had never been born.”

Nettie, heedless, light-hearted Nettie, whose experiences of life might hitherto have fairly been represented as gay as a butterfly's, stood awestruck at this exhibition of sorrow. Real, tearful, unaccountable sorrow, and Estella the sufferer !

“Darling, I am not very wise, and I fear I can't help you ; but, oh ! do talk. Do tell me what has happened ? You must be

better, if you'll only speak to your loving, sorry old Baby.

"I can't speak," sobbed Estella, "but I can cry; and your tenderness comforts me, dear."

Nettie had seated herself now, and Estella fell on her knees at her sister's feet, and burying her head in Nettie's dress, found relief in a passion of tears.

* * * *

"Darling, are you better now?" whispered Nettie softly, after a long long hour's wearying silence.

Estella did not answer, and Nettie, bending down, found that her sister's troubles were all forgotten for a time in a sound and child-like sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

CONFIDENCES.

THAT earnest talk between Hilda and St. Helier, to which Estella, in her jealous apprehension, had attached so much importance, would have caused her little else than amusement had she been able to listen to its details, instead of only watching the outward signs of an interest which seemed to engross the speakers to the exclusion of all that was happening around them.

Indeed, their case was parallel to her own, when she had been utterly absorbed in consulting with Mr. Latimer about her

literary work, while St. Helier, still chafing under the novel uncertainty of his position in regard to the Normans, had come into the Gardens, intensely desiring to be reassured by an encouraging word from his favourite Estella, and found that young lady so completely engrossed by Peregrine Latimer (whom St. Helier *now* began to find exceedingly objectionable), that she could spare neither a word nor even a smile for the jealous spectator.

Unconsciously, and most certainly without any unkind intention, St. Helier had avenged himself for the misery he had endured that afternoon in the Gardens by the suffering he caused her as she watched his glad reception of Hilda and their subsequent most confidential intercourse.

If only her ears had served her as well as her observant eyes. . . .

"You have come very late," St. Helier said, as soon as he had complimented the Signorina on the success of her Parisian toilette.

Hilda made no verbal reply, but slightly shrugged her shoulders and pressed up her lips into something very like a pout.

"I do not have a very good time in the house of Miss Theodosia," she said, after this significant silence.

"What is wrong? Don't they treat you well?" asked St. Helier in evident perplexity.

He was disturbed by a sudden sense of trouble and annoyance, and most uncomfortably reminded of the trouble he had endured about the period of Hilda's first introduction to Miss Theodosia, and during a certain very trying interview with the irate father of Estella.

Hilda, who was keenly sensitive, watched the clouds ominously gathering upon the thoughtful face of her much-esteemed friend, and instantly resolved to spare him any further trouble by passing over her grievances as lightly as possible.

"You must not distress yourself, not in the very least," she said eagerly. "Perhaps the fault is mine, and I have foolishly exaggerated my little trouble. Indeed, the old mother is most good and kind and amiable, and she shows me every consideration, but with Miss Theodosia all things are, I find, very difficult, and I fear she has by nature rather a naughty character."

"She is vicious and a snob, I know," said St. Helier crossly; "but I cannot for the life of me see how her personal qualities can in any sense interfere with you."

Hilda, noticing his vexed tone, instantly

added, with a humility that was almost pathetic,

“Indeed I do not think I am in fault, but she is really often quite cruel to me, and I am sure for some reason which I cannot even guess she does quite *hate* me.”

“Heavens!” cried St. Helier, “how came so wild a notion into your head, my poor child?”

It did indeed appear impossible to him that any one could regard this sensitive, soft-eyed queen of song with any but the friendliest feelings.

“It is no wild notion—I wish I could so delude myself—it is the simple, but the rather hard truth,” said Hilda, compressing her lips as though determined to let no further complaint escape them.

“You are unhappy then. Tell me in what manner I can help you, my dear girl?”

said St. Helier, whose compassion was aroused by the wistful and pained expression of the Signorina's tell-tale face.

She was silent for awhile, gravely reflecting over their relative positions, and painfully aware that none of his former eagerness to help her was animating him now. Only a sort of forced compassion, such as he, being naturally kind-hearted, would, of course, incline to give to any one who seemed to be in trouble.

"You can do nothing, nothing more; indeed you have done all a good friend could do for me already, *amico mio*," she answered, naturally lapsing into Italian as her words became tender.

For to the dear *padre* the simple art-collector, so far away in Rome, Hilda always spoke and wrote in his own language, although her dead mother had taught her English so efficiently.

Her life had hitherto been spent in the artistic culture of her voice, and in the learning of that stage deportment which to an operatic singer is a *sine quá non*.

Indeed she had devoted herself wholly to the fulfilment of the duties which she considered as of the utmost importance. And one of these was the care of her father's modest little home.

As yet, therefore, she had fortunately had but a very slight experience of what is called "worldly knowledge."

To study singing thoroughly, and to fulfil the duties of her position as the mistress of her father's household, had been the alpha and omega of her young life. Now that she found herself among strangers, with widening ideas and novel experiences thrusting themselves upon her, day after day, she was frequently puzzled

and at a loss to account for the varying emotions in others, which acted and reacted so strangely upon herself.

In all the turmoil of her new manner of life, however, there remained to her certain firmly established facts to which she could still cling, and these now appeared to her like life-buoys in a changeable sea.

Her love for her father and her faith in him, was firm as a rock, in itself.

And then there was another comfort in her strong admiration for, and trust in, Mr. St. Helier.

Towards Estella and her sisters Hilda felt herself much attracted; to the former especially, but Theodosia awakened a decided antipathy in the young stranger, from the first hour of their meeting.

Miss Braun herself had never been amiably disposed towards the Signorina,

whose attractive manners and marvellous voice she envied and feared.

Hitherto Mr. Latimer had been Theodosia's devoted and persistent admirer, and when Mrs. Braun began to cool towards the boarder whose account remained so long unsettled, it was Theodosia who argued the matter with her dear mamma, and managed to obtain that lady's acquiescence in granting Mr. Latimer still more time.

Latimer, keenly alive to his own interests always, was perfectly aware of the pleading and counterpleading which had taken place between mother and daughter on his account.

And in his own "noble" way, he expressed the gratitude with which Theodosia's "delicate consideration" had inspired him. More than that, he unburdened his mind to her privately, and with an understanding that his confidence must be respected, and

his affairs told to "no other living being," he enlightened Theodosia on the great Anti-Bee scheme, in the starting of which he had just now launched all his available capital.

Many and many a long confabulation took place on this subject between the heiress, Miss Braun, and the speculator, Mr. Latimer.

It will be readily understood that the ambitious young lady managed to feel her way towards obtaining an invitation for the Dowager's At-Home, at the same time. How Latimer fed her hopes with unreliable promises has been shown.

So great was poor Dosie's chagrin when the 15th actually arrived without bringing her the anticipated card, that in a fit of irrepressible annoyance she sought her mother, and in a hard dry voice told her "to

do her worst to *that* Mr. Latimer ; summons him if she chose."

Mrs. Braun whose maternal sympathy at once led her to infer that Theodosia's feelings had been wounded in some matter quite alien to the great question of regular payments, prepared herself for a decisive interview with Mr. Latimer, with whom she requested "a little private conversation in the dining-room."

"I have a business call to make, dear Madame Braun, if you will kindly excuse me," pleaded Latimer, but seeing an ominous frown upon the old lady's usually placid face, he added, "I will return as the clock strikes two, I give you my word, madam, and I regret the delay."

It was the 15th, and before granting Madame Braun an interview which might be indefinitely prolonged, Latimer resolved

to keep his prior appointment with Mrs. Vivian.

He found that lady radiant in the possession of the crisp banknotes, for which she had just called at her bankers'.

She was quite prepared at once to hand over a considerable number of these to the Honorary Secretary of that marvellous and thriving Anti-Bee scheme.

"I read of it everywhere," she said enthusiastically. "It's in the *Times* and the *Telegraph* every day, and the company must pay away a fortune in its attractive advertisements.

"The company has a fortune to do what it likes with, you see," said Latimer confidentially. "And to prove to you how thoroughly you, a lady of means and high position, are honoured for your spirit of independent enterprise, I have ventured to

bring you a letter, addressed to you by one of our directors, who saw me making out the necessary form of receipt for your money."

Mrs. Vivian glanced up expectantly.

"Is the letter from a lord?" she asked.

"It is from Sir Fulsome Venture," answered Latimer, who pronounced the name as though it were spelt with plums.

With the letter the form of receipt was produced from the capacious breastpocket into which Mrs. Vivian's £2000 presently found their way.

The clock struck two as Mr. Latimer entered Mrs. Braun's establishment, and he found that good lady in the hall, directing the unskilful efforts of a new parlour maid.

"I am punctual, dear madam, you see," said Latimer with his most genial smile.

"The luncheon is ready, so we will go to

it, before we talk together," said Mrs. Braun, but the usual expression of good humour was not on her face as she spoke.

"As you please, madam," replied Latimer, offering his arm to the old lady with a profound bow. "I hope your little account is ready for me?" he whispered interrogatively.

"It is a big bill now, for I have had to wait four entire months for my money," answered Mrs. Braun, not in a whisper.

Theodosia, standing by the dining-room window waiting for her mother, saw and heard what was going on. She was actually trembling with anxiety, and if Mr. Latimer had looked at her he would have seen a pitiful appeal in her glance.

But he was thinking of her mother at the moment, to whom he now said very confidentially,

“Can I really have been so remiss, my dear madam? Believe me, I am thoroughly ashamed of myself; but, oh! why did you not remind me of my obligation?”

“De bills was sent up regular, and I should have spoke long before dis time—” commenced Mrs. Braun, but catching sight of Theodosia’s uplifted finger, stopped herself suddenly.

“I can best prove my regret at this ridiculous delay, by immediate payment, now I am reminded of my omission,” said Latimer readily, and added in a more audible tone, “We will commence our private conversation with a complete *règlement* of our little accounts, if you please, madam.”

Hilda now entered the dining-room, followed by some of the other “guests,” and nothing further transpired about Mr.

Latimer's accounts, which he settled in full, directly luncheon was over.

Theodosia felt that she had made a fatal mistake in allowing her mother to importune this noble creature, who had so many pressing claims on his time and attention. And Peregrine quite intended that Miss Dosie should realise his displeasure, though he never addressed a word to her on the subject.

Her most severe punishment soon followed, however, for Latimer tore up an invitation-card in her presence, which he said the Dowager had kindly given him that morning to fill up as he chose.

"I know no one who would care to go at so short a notice," he said indifferently, flinging the bits of cardboard into the waste-paper basket.

Theodosia had watched him in speechless

agony; but no sooner had he left the room, than her ill-repressed vexation vented itself on innocent Hilda, who was making up maize bows for her shoes.

"Did you ask Mr. Latimer not to invite me for to-night, Signorina?" asked Dosie, with angry reproach in her eyes and her voice.

"How can you ask it?" said Hilda, with serious deprecation in her look and tone.

She was not astonished by the other's harsh manner, in which she had already had some trying experience.

Theodosia, who, as we have seen, was baffled in all her schemes, and had the additional mortification of having deeply offended the man she so much admired, allowed her angry feelings to get the better of her judgment, and said so many cruel

and bitter things to poor Hilda, that she, single-hearted and noble of purpose herself, was quite unable to account for these vagaries.

She did not in the least understand that she was but the hapless scapegoat on whom Dosie chose to vent a wrath which had its origin in her own discomfiture, and not in any deed of Hilda's.

This conduct of Miss Braun's, however, convinced the Italian that it was quite time she should seek a home elsewhere; and full of this fresh resolve, she met Mr. St. Helier at the Countess's party, and immediately unburdened her mind to her trusted friend and counsellor, who, in this case, felt himself entirely at a loss what to propose, and how to provide for the lonely girl, whose position now appeared to be more than ever complicated.

On one point, however, St. Helier was firmly resolved.

Nothing should ever again induce him in any sense to become responsible for this unprotected stranger.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFLICT.

ALTHOUGH St. Helier had arrived at so fixed a resolution in regard to his future neutral position, *vis-à-vis* the Signorina, he could not all at once sever his thoughts from the object which had so long occupied a very prominent position in them.

He had found her especially charming this evening, and though the confidences she had so naïvely whispered to him were in themselves of a most irritating nature, he had thought it very delightful to listen to

the soft melodious tones in which the poor child told her grievances to him.

And then she had left his side for a while and had stood apart from the crowd thronging around her, and had sung—what word in the rich vocabulary of praise and admiration could convey the faintest idea of *how* she had sung? . . . The echoes of her glorious voice were still thrilling in his memory as he quitted the scene of the evening's varied festivities, and slowly wended his way to his solitary home.

He had held "social gatherings" of all kinds in special abhorrence for many a long year past, and his acceptance of the Dowager's polite invitation had considerably puzzled himself.

He did not regret that he had gone; on the contrary there had been certain inci-

dents in this evening which he would on no account have missed.

He was quietly thinking over all that had occurred as he leisurely strolled across the deserted Gardens and up the incline of the Grove.

It was a sweet still summer night, peaceful and balmy.

The soft fragrant air was most deliciously welcome after the intolerable heat and glare and din of the Countess' crowded and gas-lit rooms.

St. Helier was peculiarly sensitive to exterior influences. Those who knew him best had sometimes told him that he was as fantastic, or as ridiculous, or as touchy as a woman.

Certainly, Estella herself could not have felt more gratified by the soft sympathy of the dim star-lit night—than St. Helier did,

as he took off his hat and lifted his head in silent contemplation of the vast star-spangled vault above.

He had come forth feverish, restless, disturbed, a prey to contradictory impressions, perplexed himself; and consequently dissatisfied with the rest of mankind.

It was not mankind though which troubled and perverted his thoughts at this moment; it was their varying and unaccountable nature in regard to the two women who seemed of late to have effectually disturbed the methodical and isolated existence into which he, snail-like, had voluntarily withdrawn himself.

Why did those two girls Hilda and Estella persist in haunting him either with visions of their charming faces, or with still subtler memories of their voices or their words?

He had felt terribly (ridiculously he would have said) pained by what he considered Estella's marked avoidance of him throughout this evening. He surely had never offended her personally, and there was a time not so very long ago when he had hoped. . . .

Ah! whatever he had been fool enough to hope then, must have come to a very sudden end since. That was evident from the girl's changed manner. Could fathers really regulate their daughters feelings in this despotic fashion? Had Estella once thought,—thought much and kindly of him as he supposed, and had she then, in marvellous obedience to her parent's tyrannical behest, ceased thinking of him at all?

How bright, how lovely, how lovable she had looked to-night in her dainty white attire, how piquante she was in all she said and did !

It seemed a pity though that she should bestow so many of her arch glances, so many of her whispered words on that brute Latimer. He was cast in a coarse uncouth mould, he could not appreciate the delicate *nuances* of her varying emotions and impressions. He would be sure to misunderstand the naïve confidence with which it was her wont to treat all men and then——

“D—— Latimer!” St. Helier exclaimed, as his thoughts arrived at this unpropitious climax.

Even the soothing influence of the balmy night-air was forgotten as he remembered the smile with which Estella had greeted his—his rival? preposterous! He had finished that part of his life in which women and jealousies and rivals played their important parts so very many years ago.

He had loved a woman once, foolishly,

passionately, blindly. That was in his youth,—how many years ago? And she, into whose keeping he had given his faith, his love, his entire devotion and—his honour—had cruelly, wickedly, pitilessly shamed and deceived him.

Was it likely that he would ever trust his happiness in the frail hands of any woman again?

No. Kitty O'Neil should continue to minister to his comfort, to his solitary and most delightful home, and to his general well-being.

Kitty was a good and a clever old woman, and she had helped to free him from the toils of the unscrupulous Delilah who had bound him hand and foot, body and soul. Kitty O'Neill was the right sort of person for a man to trust in.

And one of these days he would go up

into Yorkshire and see his good, his noble mother, who lived such a pure and holy life away from the world—the cold selfish world, and he would take heart of grace, and tell her the whole story of his chequered life, and ask her to counsel and advise him.

The confirmed bachelor laughed aloud as he arrived at this dubious point in his fantastic and introspective voyage of discovery. Did he intend to go to his mother, his dear good guileless mother and ask her if she thought him too old or too *blasé* or too much hampered by the cruel recollections of his misspent youth, to allow thoughts of love and hope and matrimony to enter into his heart and life again? What was all this meandering and rhodomontade that had taken possession of him to-night?

The Countess' champagne was not good and he had not touched it, nor the claret

nor the sherry. He was far too cautious to risk the headache which invariably followed on the imbibing of unknown brands and nameless vintages. Perhaps he was in his dotage already, or was his brain a little bewildered by the bright eyes and the heated rooms?

Estella, asleep and exhausted at Nettie's feet, little dreamt of the perplexed wanderer without the Gardens, who was marching aimlessly to and fro in close vicinity to No. 40, moved by the dominant desire to forget her altogether.

She had told him so much about her work, dear industrious little girl. Perhaps, when *she* was troubled and perplexed, she took refuge in her novel writing?

Work!—why should not he follow so good, so excellent an example? He had been very remiss in his attendance at

Chambers of late, and his partner had addressed several slightly critical MSS. to the Grove.

He knew he had been idling much of his time away, so much that one of the Grenfellians had utterly refused to credit that he not only had a profession, but himself considered that he actually followed it.

His visit to Rome had been too thorough a relaxation. He had contracted indolent habits while he was *en voyage*, and on his return he had had the care of Hilda, and there had been all that misunderstanding and fuss and bother. . . .

No. That sort of thing most certainly should not be repeated. One of its bitterest and most aggravating consequences was causing him perpetual pain and anxiety still.

Estella and he might have uninterruptedly

continued that friendship which began so auspiciously, if there had not been a seemingly sufficient reason for Mr. Norman's suspicious displeasure.

Alas! How ready the world still was to misconstrue the motives and the actions of women—and of men!

In his present mood, St. Helier somewhat irrelevantly assured himself that the most blameless actions were always those which met with the severest censure.

He had entered his tranquil home by this time, and he somewhat impatiently flung back the venetian shutters and opened the windows of his library wide.

The night without was as quiet as the untenanted rooms he now traversed; far too restless to think of going up to his bed, and therefore determined to make himself as

comfortable as might be under the circumstances.

He wheeled his favourite arm-chair close to the open window, and placed the table which held his reading-lamp, a bowl of ice, some soda-water, and a spirit-flask, ready at his elbow.

Then he went over to the rack in which his letters were always placed during his absence, and noticed that the evening post had supplied him with quite an unusual number of epistles on this occasion.

He glanced at the superscriptions indifferently, and selected three which he thought he might as well open to-night.

But first his pipe, the calumet of peace, must be lighted.

As he inhaled the first fragrant whiff of the bird's-eye called golden, and which he

specially affected, he smiled again, and quite without bitterness this time.

It occurred to him to wonder if Estella would open her eyes very wide, or if she would screw up her red lips in disgust if she should see him thus taking his ease with a pipe in his mouth?

Hilda had lighted both his and her father's times out of number when they were all in Rome together, and had not been in the least surprised to find how thoroughly both men enjoyed their smoke.

And sometimes she had even sung to them as they sat in peaceful puffing silence; and she had never given herself any airs—not even pretending that the tobacco choked her or made her cough, as other women did.

Yes, Hilda was a sweet-tempered, pleasant companion, and her un-English bringing-up had freed her from that conventional

exigence which the truly British female regards as her especial privilege.

In the presence of the Norman girls St. Helier would never have dreamt of producing a *cigar-case* even, whereas Hilda herself would always and readily have supplied him with the meerschaum and the tobacco jar, which mostly played an important part in his quiet evenings.

While indulging in these purposeless reflections, his hand had mechanically fallen upon the selected letters again, and he opened the first, which was a document of very businesslike appearance.

It was the synopsis of an intricate case which his partner had forwarded to him as deserving of his personal and immediate attention.

He read the lengthy statement through very carefully, and the lawyer within him

rejoiced at the perplexing mystery and puzzling contradictions which gradually presented themselves to his mental vision.

"I'll take that brief myself," he decided, "it will give me some wholesome occupation again, and it's just for the want of that I'm doing so badly now."

It was a breach of promise case, and the plaintiff was a young and attractive lady aged eighteen.

How he would like to tell Estella the amusing details of such a case! How quickly she would apprehend them all! What a pleasure it was to talk to a girl who had so trained her mind, that thinking had become an exercise and a delight to her.

She would not only enjoy hearing his forensic exposition of the cases brought to his notice, but she would also be quite

able to appreciate the science with which he always sought to handle his subjects; and then, by way of mutual recreation, they would convert *cases* into plots, and those plots she could use for her novels, while he also should zealously endeavour to work. . . . As regarded her, those were very, very visionary castles he was building in the future. But for himself, he must and he would leave off dreaming, and he would settle to his professional duties again, the very next morning.

Too long had he played the truant already, but now he would return to his work, work he had until very lately gloried in, and which he had always performed to the very best of his ability, keenly enjoying those difficulties which necessitated the exercise of the patience, and perspicacity,

which so eminently characterised him in his professional career.

“If a man is busy, and busy about his duty, what more does he require for time or for eternity?”

Before he journeyed to Rome, St. Helier had sedulously striven to act up to that dutiful standard expressed in Charles Kingsley’s suggestive words, but since his return to London. . . . Bah! had he forgotten his manhood, that he should be vainly philandering thus?

To-morrow, yes, to-morrow he would start afresh, and then no more time should be wasted in these meaningless rhapsodies, about two children.

He was quite an old man now, and his hair was turning very grey, what could he have in common with girls in their teens? Well, his smoke and think had pacified

him; he could go to bed now with a chance of some hours' sleep. But stay, there was another letter for him to read first, not a business communication this, but a thin epistle written on foreign paper and in a small crabbed Italian hand, a long expected letter from Hilda's father, his good old friend, the Signor Santarelli.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ROMAN LETTER AND THE ENIGMA.

Rome, June 12th.

My Good Friend,—

Hilda writes to me often, of course, and her letters teem with your praises.

She speaks of her *maestro* also, of her voice, her many new friends, and her surroundings generally. The refrain of all her news, however, is invariably “that kind, or that generous, or that noble Mr. St. Helier.”

This devotion to you, much as it must please me knowing and esteeming you as I

do, at the same time fills me with self-reproach.

You are surprised, and I ask me *why* it is a trouble to me, that my only and beloved child should share my affection for the man I most esteem in this world, where few have appeared to me deserving of lasting regard?

I am writing this letter to explain my reasons to you, and I will leave it to you to decide whether or not they are valid, and also what course you deem it advisable to pursue under these circumstances.

There is, in return for my perfect confidence, one favour which I dare venture to ask of you.

Do not permit my letter to influence your personal conduct in any way.

Above all things, do not attempt to coerce yourself into imagining that the com-

passionate sympathy which my words may arouse in your heart, might pass muster for a warmer—a tenderer feeling.

That would be a terrible mistake ; indeed, the *second* grave error of your life, and this time a fatal, because an irretrievable one.

When St. Helier had carefully read so much of his old friend's letter, and paid especial attention to the last paragraph, which was underlined to make it the more impressive, he paused for a moment in evident bewilderment, and then instinctively adjusted the wick of his reading lamp, though that would help to throw some light upon the subject.

Finally he returned to the letter again, hoping that its continued perusal would give him a clearer insight into the thoughts which must have been perplexing the poor

old Signor's brain, while he slowly traced them in his small and crabbed writing.

When you were staying here in Rome with us you met Mrs. Vivian and her young son Ronald.

He is deeply in love with my daughter, and has repeatedly besought her to become his wife. He has also appealed to me for my consent, and has asked me to plead his cause with my dear child. As I like and esteem this handsome and attractive youth, I did urge Hilda to listen favourably to him, sure as I was that he would make her an excellent, a most devoted husband. But at first, neither his prayers nor mine were of any avail.

Time, which in these cases mostly works wonders, was not granted us, for just at this critical moment, Madame Vivian, who has

not very fine sympathies, unfortunately offended my Hilda, who is proud and sensitive.

What their disagreement was I do not exactly know; but you, who are acquainted with both the women, will readily understand that they could never have agreed.

After that breach, Hilda refused to see either Ronald or his arrogant mother.

It was the first time my child had ever decidedly opposed me, and we both suffered much pain in consequence.

All this happened shortly before your arrival here.

And Ronald, who is still very young, and perhaps morbidly sensitive, had so tormented himself about my girl's refusal to see him, that he fell seriously ill, and seemed quite unable to rouse himself, or to receive any sort of consolation.

He swore to his mother that he was

dying, and that he longed to die for Hilda's sake. . . .

Men don't die of love, as you and I both know, my dear Everard; but this lad certainly pined and fretted and wasted himself to a shadow.

Then the true spirit was aroused in the mother. She came to my girl quite humbly, and prayed her to lend a more willing ear to poor Ronald's pleading.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded—

“Good God!” exclaimed St. Helier, and the letter fell from his uplifted hand.

“So she has actually pledged herself to Ronald Vivian!” he muttered, and his face looked blank and woe-begone as he realised the surprising fact. . . .

But, that being the case, what could Santarelli have meant by that *rigmorale* in

the commencement of the letter about sympathy and compassion and warm and tender feelings?

St. Helier was fairly puzzled now, having previously put a construction of his own upon all those mysterious phrases.

The letter had fallen from his hand as he had read that startling word *yielded*, which happened to close the last line on the third page.

“What further does my old friend say in the way of general contradiction?” he mused, and leisurely returning to the discarded epistle, recommenced its perusal at the top of the last page.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded—to a certain degree.

She promised to bind herself to no other lover by any word or pledge until after her débüt at the Opera.

Then Ronald, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, began to rejoice, and hope once more filled the young heart, which but a short time before had been ready to perish in the bitterness of its first despair. . . .

Ah ! my good Everard, to us men of the world who have lived through all this so many years ago, it seems too ludicrous, and yet time was when we also may have felt it a matter of life and death.

You see I talk to you so much *en bon camarade*, that I forget *my* age, and most unwarrantably double yours.

Will you forgive me this injustice and also my prolixity ? I have very nearly completed my task now, and think I have fairly described to you the exact state of affairs here, when *you* appeared in our midst.

You know how Hilda pleaded to follow her *maestro* to London, and you know how

I, acting under your kind advice and offers of assistance, was brought to consent.

I completely abstained from all mention of young Ronald's love and hopes while you were here, because Hilda most earnestly implored me not to speak of the matter to you at all.

This she did when you had been with us a week, on the Sunday evening after her first serious conversation with you.

I had no idea of the motive which prompted her to this reserve then, though now it has dawned upon me.

"Why doesn't he explain?" muttered St. Helier, "I hate enigmas."

But the wistful gleam in his eyes, as he commented thus, betrayed keen satisfaction rather than wearying doubt.

Further details, questions, and suggestions

were contained in the Signor's lengthy and exhaustive epistle, which was continued on a second closely-written sheet. But St. Helier's interest in it ceased, as he came to the end of that fourth page which concluded with what he was pleased to designate as an *enigma*.

CHAPTER X.

"NIGHT BRINGETH COUNSEL."

ESTELLA's sudden though profound sleep, on the ground at her sister's feet, had been the natural result of utter exhaustion, both mental and physical.

The poor girl had literally been overwrought, in consequence of the successive and contending emotions she had lived through on the momentous occasion, which really was her *débat* in London society.

The loneliness of her position in that great busy, chattering, restless crowd of

strangers, had of course enhanced what she had soon realised to be an ordeal. . . .

If only dear, calm, restful Mary had been there, the mere fact of whose presence always brought assurance with it; or joyous chattering Nettie, who would have clung to her arm and made her laugh where, alone and unsympathised with, it had been very hard to her to keep from crying.

Mrs. Toegoode had been particularly kind and considerate, Estella knew, but Mrs. Toegoode was as yet a mere stranger to her, of whom she really knew little more than she did of the rest of that seething, pushing, preoccupied crowd of "celebrities."

And Mrs. Toegoode very naturally looked upon such an assembly as that at the Dowager's, from a business or professional point of view.

"Adela-ida is seeking whom she may

devour, as usual," Estella had heard one large bold-eyed woman remarking to a thin and sallow literary "sister," as Mrs. Toegoode possessed herself of the arm of the editor of the *Sphere*, into whose not unwilling ear she was evidently whispering some flattering confidences.

How bitter and jealous and cruel women seem to be to one another, Estella had thought with a kind of instinctive reproach to her sex. She felt quite sure, for her own part, that if once her brain's work entitled her to a place in the profession of the *literati*, she would feel in complete harmony with all the other members, men or women, and would at all times be only too thankful to lend a helping hand to a novice if she had either the chance or the power to give such assistance.

Mrs. Toegoode before parting with the

girl had very considerably volunteered to look over Estella's MS. and advise her as to what she had better do with it. This kindness on the over-worked authoress's part had, of course, lent additional zest to Estella's kind feeling towards her chaperon, and yet the poor child had felt herself thoroughly miserable, friendless, and isolated in the midst of some real but far more fictitious gaiety.

Under other circumstances than those which perplexed and distressed her last night, Estella would naturally have turned to Hilda for the comfort of companionship. But Hilda, she thought ruefully, was, of course, very much better engaged in whispering and listening to Mr. St. Helier, and had neither time nor attention to spare for her lonely and *forsaken* friend.

Why Estella should have so commise-

ratingly styled herself forsaken, she herself might have been at a loss to explain the next morning, but at night things always do look dark. . . .

This was the girl's practical conclusion as she lay tossing in her bed, wakeful, despondent, thoroughly dissatisfied with herself, and therefore with the rest of the world.

Nettie had very tenderly aroused her from that first heavy slumber which had followed as closely on her sobs as used to be the case in the days of her childhood, when the result of trouble, temper, or tears, always was what nurse had called "a healing, wholesome sleep."

Scarcely awakened by Nettie's timid exhortation to rise and come upstairs to bed, poor Estella had allowed herself to be led up into her own little "den," where Nettie soon managed to settle her safely in the

pink-curtained bed. And there, restlessly tossing, Estella had passed most of the events of the evening in very dreary review.

The first faint glimmer of dawn began stealthily to creep in through the interstices of the venetian blinds before Estella once more forgot her troubles in sleep, which, coming naturally at last, was thoroughly invigorating and refreshing.

* * * *

The welcome light of the glad summer morning was filling her room with its golden splendour, when the loud clanging of the dressing-bell aroused Estella to consciousness again.

But her first waking thoughts were very different to those last dismal and despondent ones, which had not left her, "while the dark night made all things dark to look upon."

As she sat up in her little pink-curtained

bed now, shading her eyes from the too brilliant morning light, her mind instantly reverted to the few moments of mysterious but unalloyed delight which had been vouchsafed to her on the previous evening.

She remembered the hurried, strange perplexing words which St. Helier had whispered to her, as he had so unexpectedly followed her out of the supper-room last night.

Surely, he had seized her hand, and he had held it closely clasped in his—and he had called her cruel ; yes, that was the word he had used.

She seemed to hear it whispered in her ear once more, with the same lingering reproachful inflexions of his voice, which had thrilled her when he spoke it first.

And then, after a bewildering pause, in which she felt his breath upon her cheek

and heard her own heart beating audibly—he had said something more, something about her father's forbidding her to speak to him.

Who could have told him anything about that wretched misunderstanding?

No one. She felt more than ever sure on that head now; for only Mary, Nettie, and herself knew of it, and she knew she could rely implicitly on their silence and discretion.

She surely could not have dreamt all about that mysterious little episode?

Could St. Helier's perplexing words and looks and tones have all been conjured up by her over-wrought imagination?

No. He had spoken thus, and looked thus, and he had clasped and held her hand—it was all real, and she was—oh! so thankful—that it had happened; for it seemed to

prove that he could still give her some of his thoughts and some of his attention, though, of course, Hilda had the greatest claim on both.

Well, it was less hard to think that it was good, generous Hilda who was thus blessed, than it would have been had the favoured one been some unsympathetic stranger, thought poor Estella, conscientiously striving to ignore herself altogether.

Hilda was good and sweet, and kind and affectionate, and after all she could not be so very happy, quite alone in this great unsympathetic crowd of Londoners.

Still, with that glorious, all-enchanting voice, and assured of St. Helier's devotion, what mattered loneliness or a crowd?

Surely, neither home nor sisters nor other congenial society would be missed, if one had such a fund of content within oneself.

“I would change places with her—yield my circumstances for hers gladly, eagerly—without one moment’s hesitation,” Estella murmured, concluding her morning meditation very suddenly as the breakfast-bell reminded her that hurry-scurry was now the order of the day, since she had not even taken her matutinal plunge as yet, and father objected to beginning his breakfast without the full complement of his daughters.

“And were you pleased with your entertainment last night, Stella?” asked Mr. Norman, smiling affectionately at his daughter, whose hasty toilet had but served to heighten the natural brightness of her eyes and her complexion.

Nettie glanced wistfully up at Estella, whom she had last seen so wan and so painfully weary.

Then the Baby had tenderly coaxed and

striven to comfort her sad sister, the nature of whose troubles—during a crowded *soirée* at a Countess's!—seemed so utterly inexplicable to joyous, honey-sipping, flighty Nettie.

Now she glanced up, prepared to behold the same pale, drawn face, with its reddened eyelids which had sobered her into profound though uncomprehending' compassion in the darkest hour of the short summer night.

But the past month, which had developed Nettie's powers of observation, had taught Estella a certain reticence and discretion, which stood her in good stead now.

By neither word nor look did she allude to those secret griefs, for which she knew her father and Mary could not possibly have either comprehension or sympathy.

In reply to her father's enquiries, she

answered glibly and with a happy smile, that she had been amused exceedingly ; that some of the people were very interesting, especially the two notable editors, who carried on such a vivacious, wordy, and protracted duel ; and that the two authoresses of the sensational and of the voluptuous school had not impressed her favourably at all.

Hilda, she said, was exquisitely dressed, was looking her very best ; had sung admirably, and evidently made a complete conquest of Lord Goselyngge, who seemed enraptured with her voice and her finished delivery.

The Countess, she thought—perhaps it was very impertinent on her part to make such hazardous remark,—but she really had thought that the Countess was not—not very lady-like.

Nettie glanced at her conservative father

in some alarm at these ill-considered words of her rash sister, but Mr. Norman, instead of frowning, laughed approvingly. "I am glad to find you have such power of discrimination, my dear Estella," said he. "Neither a title nor money can give birth, birth and breeding.

"The late Earl, when young and foolish, stooped—stooped very low for the wife who is the mother of the present Earl, and whose station, therefore, commands our respect, even if her manners do not inspire it. I have, of course, made it my business to inquire fully into this matter before I could permit any one of you girls to enter her ladyship's house. And I have assured myself that it is in manners only her ladyship is wanting, her character is now, as it has been ever since her marriage, above suspicion."

Mr. Norman was certainly very partial to the sound of his own voice, and quite enjoyed the giving of exhaustive explanations on every conceivable subject and occasion.

Mary, who in some slight degree inherited this verbose predilection of her father's, was yet the first to check his indulgence in it, which she mostly contrived to do by adroitly diverting his attention from a subject which threatened to lead to a *flux de mots*.

"You have not said a word about Mrs. Toegoode, Estella; was she amiable?" Mary hastily enquired, as soon as her father's momentary pause enabled her to speak without precisely interrupting him.

"Indeed, yes, she was quite charming," answered Estella readily. "She is a much nicer woman than any of you give her credit for, and she certainly was very good to me all the evening."

"I told her a great deal more about my book than I ever ventured to do before, and I quite managed to make her understand that my writing isn't just done by way of amusement; but that it is real hard, honest work; that I care far more for it than for parties and dances and dresses, and all that sort of young ladies' diversion." (Estella's sublime contempt for the congenial pursuits of her age and class was highly edifying to listen to). "And Mrs. Toegoode believed me, she knew I was in earnest; and what is better still, she promised to help me with my book herself, and told me to go over and see her this morning, when she intends to give me some useful advice and practical hints."

Seeing the "signs of a coming storm" in her father's twitching eyebrows, Estella added in quick entreaty—"You must not say I'm not to go, father dear, please. She

really is a good, kind-hearted woman, and thoroughly understands the practical part of her profession, too. Mr. Snereton himself advised me to apply to her for useful information, and I know if I *do* write, you would be the first to desire that I should be thoroughly acquainted with every detail of my profession."

Estella certainly was endowed with that essentially womanly tact, which enables its possessor to put the man from whom she desires a concession into a thoroughly good temper with himself, by convincing him that his words of wisdom have been listened to and cherished.

"If poor Mrs. Toegoode's husband is a gambler, and a spendthrift, and a lazy——"

"Good-for-nothing fellow!" suggested Nettie officiously.

"That cannot possibly hurt *me*, you

know!" continued Estella, far too much preoccupied to take any notice of her sister's interpolation.

"I only desire to see Adela-ida on *business*, and to receive the necessary instruction in rule and routine which every profession demands.

"When you, all of you, see my first novel in print, you will thoroughly appreciate the benefit I have derived from this official interview with the kind and experienced writer, who has offered me, a novice, some necessary assistance." Estella's face was so radiant as she dwelt upon the visionary prospect of her ultimate literary success, that even Mr. Norman began to *believe* in its possibility and felt his paternal heart warming at the prospect of being known as the father of "that new authoress, a charming girl, you know," etc. etc.

So far once a young prophet did receive honour "in her own country," and by way of lending point to the contradiction, the homage was tendered before it was merited.

"You certainly are neither a chatterbox nor a gossip, my dear," said Mr. Norman, graciously returning to the matter under discussion, "and I really don't think this gushing female will do you any harm. It is not so much on her own account I object to her, as on that of her manifold and doubtful acquaintances."

"I'll promise to take my departure the moment the visitors' bell is heard," cried Estella, in high glee at obtaining her father's consent so readily. "Mr. Toegoode goes off to Newmarket at ten," she added; "so I was told to present myself at eleven."

CHAPTER XI.

"I DARE NOT."

"MRS. VIVIAN has been graciously pleased to invite me to go and have luncheon with her to-day, and to inspect a box of new dresses which she has just received from Paris. So don't you stay too long at Mrs. Toegoode's, Stella, or we shall have Nettie fainting for want of some one to listen to her pretty prattle."

It was Mary who spoke as the sisters were preparing to go their several ways after breakfast.

"I think it's very shabby of you, Mary, to refuse to take me when you know I am longing to go and see that delightful Shoddy-Princess again," cried Nettie, a pout on her lips and a smile in her eyes. "You might as well say you were unaccustomed to going out unaccompanied," she added, the smile mischievously illumining her whole face. "I have to state those ridiculous facts for Mother Grundy's satisfaction, why shouldn't you?"

"Little girls must be left at home now and then," said Mary, who was really sorry for the Baby, to whom solitude was always a punishment. It never occurred to the quiet eldest sister, that it was for Ronald's sake Nettie so much desired to accompany her to Mrs. Vivian.

"And I s'pose you won't let me come with you either, Stella?" her sister whis-

pered, presently, as Estella stood, her hand on the latch of the window which looked out into the Gardens.

To open it, she had pulled up the blind and a dazzling glare of sunshine now flooded the room.

Covering her eyes with her hand to exclude the painfully brilliant light, she answered her sister's timid little petition,

"No, darling; forgive me if I don't ask you to come with me this morning; I really cannot do so. We are going to talk quite solemnly, you see, and only about business, so you or any third person would be *de trop* of course. Don't be vexed, you dearest old Baby," Estella continued, seeing the keen disappointment in her sister's face. "I am so anxious to accomplish some thoroughly good work at last, and I shall be so very

much happier in every respect if I succeed in this undertaking."

She spoke very gravely, and her tone carried conviction to sympathetic Nettie, who quite understood her "clever" sister now.

"I'll only beg of you, to tell me *all* she says about Gwendolen, dear," she whispered, resting her chin against Estella's shoulder, with a pretty caressing manner which was habitual to her.

"I promise to tell you everything, Nettie, as soon as I return," said Estella gaily; "and I have still a heap of news in reserve for you about last night, and the rival editors, and how pleasant they both were to me, and how hopeful I feel about Gwendolen now, though no one seems to approve of such a simple title—it's only a girl's name after all, you see."

"But such a girl!" cried Nettie, with enthusiasm, and suddenly recalling a previous train of thought, she added anxiously, "Was Ronald Vivian there last night? He said he should return from Cambridge before the 16th."

"I was too tired and too—too stupid last night, to tell you anything, dear Baby, but I have a number of nice messages for you from several people, and, 'let me whisper it in thine ear, my darling,' Master Ronald desired his *kindest* regards. All the rest you shall hear on my return. Ta, ta! Pull down the blinds again, or Mary will scold, because the sun fades the new carpets. That's eleven o'clock, I'm off."

She made her way out of the window, leaving Nettie to exclude the sun's rays, while she herself rejoiced in their brilliance,

as she stepped out into the balmy beauty of the glorious summer morning.

The dew-drops which had glistened on grass and leaves some hours ago, had all been absorbed by the powerful heat already ; but the moisture, which had sparkled like diamonds in the sun's rays before, was in the balmy air still, lending it a subtle dewy fragrance, which to Estella seemed perfectly delicious. She inhaled it gratefully, as it appeared to lend quite a new zest to her capacity for happiness again.

Since she had become acquainted with St. Helier, her former enjoyment in the mere fact of existence had left her ; and instead of a psalm of perpetual rejoicing, she had felt woefully tempted to chant a continual "miserere" in secret.

Not a soul was visible in the long oval

of the Gardens, and all the windows facing the morning sun were closely curtained.

Estella had never seen the 'Recreation-Ground' thus deserted before, but in her present mood, this solitude was delightful.

It seemed to her as if she were in her own garden, as she stooped to inhale the delicate fragrance of a freshly opened moss-rose, which grew in the centre of one of the jealously-guarded flower-beds, which were the pride and joy of most of the Grenfellians.

They somewhat arrogantly declared, indeed, that theirs were the only Gardens in London, in which choice flowers were allowed to thrive unharmed for the benefit of all the visitors.

It was only when Estella put out an eager hand, longing to pluck that rose, that she suddenly remembered she was not in

her own territory, and flushing hotly at the thought that she had very nearly committed what she and all Grenfellians would certainly have considered a theft, she closely hugged her bulky parcel of manuscript and hurried on, keeping very strictly to the gravelled path now.

As she approached the small gate at the far end of the Gardens, however, she paused for a moment, pulling her broad-brimmed hat well over her face, for the dazzling sunlight was almost blinding her.

How cool and inviting the Grove looked, its avenue of trees filling it with shade ! Did all the branches meet overhead ? Estella wondered, and moved close up to the gate in order to ascertain if the verdant arch made by the meeting branches of the first trees in the rows continued all the way along the Grove.

She was so very much interested in this question that she felt sorely tempted to walk out of the Gardens and along the Grove, in order to satisfy herself on the subject. Why should she not go, it would not be at all out of her way to go through the Grove, and then round to the front of the Gardens to No. 3?

She wanted to have another look at all those "bijou" residences, and most of all at that *multum in parvo* which Nettie had been so enraptured with on that eventful musical afternoon. . . . "And *he* called me cruel!" Estella pondered, leaning upon the little gate now, but not having passed through it.

She was glad to stand there and think—glad to know she was so near to the little house which his care and skill had made so beautiful. Should she ever have the chance

of entering it again, she wondered, and would Hilda be there if she did, and which of them all would be most cruel then? For her part, she was quite prepared to suffer again, if only the delight of St. Helier's presence could be secured to her at the same time.

What would she not be willing to bear for the sake of seeing him now!

The desire within her became so urgent that with the vague hope of seeing him at his study window if she passed up the Grove, she was preparing to let herself out of the Gardens' exit, when she caught sight of St. Helier himself, who had just come out of his garden, closing the gate behind him with a sharp click, and sauntering lazily down the incline towards her.

He wore a straw hat with a broad black ribbon and light summer clothes, and Estella

thought he looked more charming than she had ever seen him.

For an instant it occurred to her that it would be less embarrassing for her if she sat down in the shadow of the spreading oak-tree, against which a seat was most invitingly placed. But, then, he might not see her at all—he might pass on unheeding, following the road, along the outside of the Gardens.

Was he on his way to No. 39? . . . As that cruel thought entered her mind, she shivered in spite of the heat, and with this physical expression of her mental anxiety, she resolved to stand still where she was and wait for him; *she* certainly would not sacrifice this golden opportunity of a talk with him, for the sake of sparing herself a momentary feeling of embarrassment. Ah! here he was, shaking hands with her, and so

delighting her with his pleased look of surprise that she forgot herself altogether in her eager response to his gay greeting. "Up with the lark, and fresh as Aurora!" he exclaimed, reluctantly allowing her to withdraw the hand she had laid into his. "Since you are here, may I not be permitted to enter also?" he asked, drawing the gate-key off her little finger, on which she had hung it.

She smiled her assent, and he unlocked the gate, entered the Gardens, and motioned to the bench under the oak-tree.

"Are you in a hurry?" he enquired, after a moment's hesitation, as the vision of her irate parent rose before his mind's eye.

Instead of any spoken reply, she seated herself, and drew the folds of her crisp white skirt close to her, thus leaving the greater portion of the bench unoccupied; then she

smiled up at him as much as to say, "You see I have left plenty of room for you."

He understood and accepted the frank invitation of her bright glance, and leisurely seating himself by her side, he laid his hand upon the bulky parcel, which was now resting on her knees.

"More *notes*?" he enquired, with that dubious smile of his which had been haunting her for so many a long day past now.

"I fancy I see some blue lines; oh, yes! and some writing, too!" he continued, drawing the manuscript gently out of its brown paper husk.

She did not attempt to check or resist him; indeed she was only too thankful to have him close by her side once again, and evidently a little bit interested in her affairs. "Since I've managed to find my way into

the shell all alone," he said, "you might be generous, and show me the kernel now."

With trembling fingers she untied the knotted string, and drawing forth the roll of manuscript, handed it to him without further hesitation.

She really felt that she was conferring an immense favour in allowing him to have a look at the cherished work of all her leisure hours during the last ten weeks.

He, for his part, was evidently much impressed by this decided proof of her confidence, and turned over the pages of the manuscript with as much care and reverence as even the heart of an aspiring authoress could possibly desire.

To a bystander, the little scene might have suggested the wistful anxiety with which a fond young mother watches a stranger handling the fragile treasure of

which she has but lately become the happy possessor herself.

Indeed, the simile would not be an unsuitable one, for, to Estella, this the first offspring of her brain, the mental baby, which after many hours of anxious thought and assiduous labour she had at last brought into something like form, this brain-child, in fact, was as important, and her feeling for it as anxious as, though perhaps less tender than, that of the real mother above alluded to.

“How industrious you have been, Miss Estella!” was St. Helier’s first verbal comment; but his eager and attentive eyes had already said a great deal to her who had watched them so anxiously. “When first we spoke of this novel together,” he continued, presently, “I had no idea you were so thoroughly in earnest about it all. I

believe at that time you had only commenced to make desultory notes ? ”

“ Yes ; but now I have finished the first volume,” she cried, with a smile of triumph and elation, which lit up her expressive face, and made it quite beautiful.

“ And has any one helped you with the story ? ” he asked, evidently interested now.

“ Only dear Nettie, with her unflagging spirits and her shrewd comments,” said Estella, smiling ; and added, “ I think I have been wonderfully fortunate for a beginner, for Mr. Latimer has kindly promised to assist me in getting my book read by some editor who is a friend of his, and who will certainly give me a fair chance.”

“ Oh ! ” said St. Helier, and said nothing more, but apparently busied himself with reading a sentence here and there in the manuscript.

Her sudden and familiar mention of Mr. Latimer's name in connection with the work, which was evidently her first interest in life, had given him a shock for which he was unable to account.

"Could there be any tie between them?" was the question which filled him with a sudden dismay.

Then he felt inclined to protest savagely against this unwelcome mental inquiry; but the sudden remembrance of her confidential colloquy with Latimer, as she sat on this very bench by his side but a few days ago, by no means reassured St. Helier.

He remembered with a pang, which he would not admit to be jealousy, that Estella was far too much absorbed in talking and listening to "that brute" (hitherto Latimer had been considered a very delightful companion) to take the very slightest notice of

him, St. Helier, who had broken an engagement, and walked into the Gardens on that particular afternoon, solely with a view to getting a glimpse of, perhaps a word with, the charming Estella, who had been haunting him as pertinaciously as he, all unconsciously, had been haunting her. . . .

He did get the "glimpse" he had longed for, but nothing more, as we know; and he had felt very disappointed and very unhappy, and as he walked away, smarting under a keen sense of the injury (?) she had done him, he had racked his brains with innumerable and most perplexing questions, to not a single one of which he was able to give himself anything like a satisfactory reply. Had she only pretended not to see him, to avoid giving him the "cut direct" which that crotchety old father of hers had perhaps insisted upon?

In any case, his afternoon was lost, and even now he smarted at the recollection of the savage feelings which had agitated him then ; so thoroughly upset had he been by the scene he had witnessed in the Gardens that he had felt himself compelled to go to Hilda and implore her to sing to him, and in listening to her melodious tones his ruffled spirit had regained its wonted calm. Poor Hilda ! what a glorious voice she had, and what a noble, generous nature ! Ah, well ! if Estella had really engaged herself to Mr. Latimer—then he, St. Helier, would prove that he also could be generous, for he would strive to do all that lay in his power to bring about the fruition of young Ronald Vivian's hopes of happiness. . . . What a commotion a double wedding from the Gardens would cause to all Grenfellians ! . . . Ronald would probably

require the services of the kind friend who had so generously helped him to win a prize in the matrimonial lottery, as best man. Should he accept the invitation? He laughed aloud at the ludicrous notion, and poor Estella, who had already been much perplexed by his extraordinary silence, asked timidly,

“Do you find it so ridiculous?” She pointed to the open pages of the manuscript as she spoke. He had all this time been closely bending over them, apparently absorbed in their perusal.

He started visibly as she so suddenly addressed him, and laughed again in his delight at finding her there alone by his side, while Latimer, and Hilda and Ronald, with the church and the altar, faded like dissolving views from his mental vision.

“Forgive me, Miss Estella,” he said

deprecatingly; "something I read here reminded me of a joke of my student days. How fortunate for you and your printers that your writing is so legible!" he commented, presently. But he hardly looked at her now, and was speaking in the dry tone which always made her fear that she had in some way displeased him. "I had almost hoped," she said, hesitating painfully between the words—"I had hoped once that *you* perhaps would kindly have given me a few hints—a little advice—Mr. St. Helier; you offered to do so, do you remember? and you have so much experience, and know all about plots and real men and women of the world, whereas all I could tell was about our former simple country life at Oakhurst, or just some little bits of experiences which have come to me since—I have known you," were the words

on her lips, but she recollected herself just in time, and discreetly substituted "since we have all lived in London."

"Hilda would make a fine character for a heroine," suggested St. Helier interrogatively, after another long pause.

"I have tried to describe her as an artist," said Estella, too much interested in her work at the moment, to be disturbed by the petty jealousy such a remark would have provoked in the mind of the conventional young lady.

"Your gentle reproof has so painfully reminded me of my unpardonable shortcomings as regards *our* novel," he resumed presently, "that I scarcely dare venture to ask a favour of you now?" He paused and looked straight into her eyes, as he added pleadingly, "Will you trust me with this until to-morrow?" He rolled up the manu-

script as he spoke, and held it towards her, awaiting her decision.

"I should be very grateful to you if you would take the trouble to read it," she said, evidently gratified by his request. "I do not think you will be too severe a critic, for you will surely bear in mind that this is my first attempt, and that I have lived away in the country very quietly all my life."

"I will forget nothing you have told me," he replied.

"And you will tell me your opinion, your real thoughts about it all?" she said, rising, and looking up at him as he stood by her side, with so wistful an appeal in her eyes that he could not meet them quite steadily with his.

She at this moment was thinking wholly of her work. He was thinking only of her.

She started almost guiltily as all the clocks with one accord commenced to strike, and she mechanically counted—twelve.

“I have missed my appointment,” she said, but her smile betrayed no regret, “I meant to take my writing to Mrs. Toe-goode to-day, who has promised me some practical assistance.”

“Will you give me the chance of trying to render you some such help in Mrs. Toegoode’s stead?” he enquired. “If you are not satisfied with me to-morrow, you can keep your appointment with Mrs. Toe-goode then.”

She had already shaken hands with him and was turning away, when he approached her again.

“In any case *I* shall depend on seeing you here to-morrow at the same time and *alone*?” he said interrogatively, and if she

dared to meet his eyes she would find very eloquent entreaty in them now, but she does not dare, for his low tender tones are thrilling her with a subtle ecstasy which is nearly allied to pain. "Will you promise me, Estella?" he repeated anxiously, and clasped her little hand closely again, just as he did last night.

It was no dream, she remembers it all too vividly, as with an effort she tears herself from his detaining grasp.

"I *dare* not," she says, and scuds away over the grass, her white skirt flashing like a sunlit sail.

St. Helier stood motionless watching her, until she had disappeared beyond a bed of shrubs and flowering lilac-trees.

"She dare not?" he muttered half aloud in vexed interrogation. "Dare not what? —not promise—or not come?" A sudden

smile lit up his perplexed face, as his eye fell on the roll of manuscript he held in his hand.

“She will come for this, if not for me,” he thought, with returning satisfaction, and sauntered leisurely away homewards.

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END OF VOL. II.

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